



*The
Twelfth
Summer*

Alessa

The Twelfth Summer

by Alessa

Prologue

The dreary mist outside swirls on the stone walls enclosing my family's garden this autumn afternoon. From my vantage at the tall windows of the manor, I watch as shades of brown, yellow, and red blend together upon the dampened foliage. A light rain had just begun to fall, dotting the glass pane before me.

It has always been in these private moments that I find solace amongst nature's quiet variations of the season. As a spinster woman of forty years, my duties now lie mainly within these walls, overseeing the household and estate matters. But out there, in that soggy landscape, lie remnants of vivid memories from warmer days gone by.

I recalled picking baskets of berries as a child, my dress stained with the fruits' dark hues. Father would laugh to see my grubby face emerging from the brush. Those joyful echoes now faded with time, like the vibrancy fading from the trees before me. Most of my family had since passed away, while I remain as caretaker of the legacy of our name and lineage tied to these grounds.

Stately trees stand sentinel, branches gracefully bereft of leaves, allowing glimpses of the heavens' mood. Their boughs stretch protectively over winding paths now rendered mulchy by fallen leaves. Moss creeps over stone walls, absorbing the gentle moisture that shields enduring perennials from the weather's contempt.

My gaze draws to the stone fountain at the garden's centre, its carved cherubs now veiled by a sheen of mist. How many summer evenings had I spent there as a young girl, listening to the chorus of frogs and letting my imagination wander to distant shores, spun from romantic tales? It seems another lifetime ago. The cool droplets now falling betrayed the arrival of winter's breath. Nature was readying her slumber as evening drew near, darkness swallowing what remained of colour in that once lively grove.

Just then came a light rap on the parlour door behind me, pulling me from my reveries.

"Yes, come in," I replied, turning to see Jane the housemaid enter, a letter in hand.

"A posting just arrived for you, Madam. It's got foreign stamps—looks to be from Italy?" Her words piqued my interest.

I took the soggy envelope into my hand. The postage stamps bore foreign designs indeed, but it was the unmistakable penmanship on the front that made my heart quicken. The familiar hand belonged to the one I had not seen in many years.

My fingers trembled slightly as I broke the crimson wax seal bearing the Moretti family crest. Unfolding the crisp page within, my eyes scanned the familiar, elegant script with which only one could pen such an intimate note.

My dear Emmeline,

It brings me both joy and sorrow to write to you now as a widow. While I have been granted new freedoms without my husband's estate and title binding me, I find this grand palazzo feels empty and lonely without laughter filling its halls. I often think back to our time together all those years ago and reflect on how our lives have changed since. You remain dutifully attending to your family's estate, while my status now allows for continental adventures once more.

Yet it is with a heavy heart that I recall that brief but passionate interlude we shared in Castel Gandolfo, for it awakened feelings within me I hold dear to this day. Your courage to express your affection and follow your heart's longings, regardless of everyone's disdain and jealous contempt, was truly admirable. I still marvel at the independence and bravery you possessed even at such a young age. While youthful ardour has since shaped us both in no doubt unforeseen ways, I hope that you, like myself, have been able to find lessons in both life's triumphs and mistakes.

It is my sincere hope that upon receiving this letter, those cherished memories we made all those years ago may bring a smile to your face, as they continue to do for me during my solitary evenings. Please know that your courage and spirit have stayed with me ever since our time together.

*Yours affectionately,
Sofia*

So much had changed in the thirty years since our brief interlude in Castel Gandolfo, yet seeing the Contessa's hand once more carried me back to those heady summer days of my youth. How vibrant the flowers had seemed in ornamental gardens, their perfume as intoxicating as stolen kisses amidst the blossoms. Her passion had set my soul aflame in ways London society deemed shameful, though to me our love knew no bounds of class or creed even then.

As the daylight waned on the gardens, I scanned the familiar signature once more and allowed a small, private smile. Beyond reminiscence, the Contessa's words hinted at possibility—that fates might align again to continue what time and expectations once forced apart. Though duties here remained, her letter rekindled flickers of the vibrant spirit I thought long dormant. Nature's gentle fluctuations echoed within, stoking embers of hope that joys of spring need not fade with summer's end.

Laying the letter aside, my eyes wandered the sodden garden, growing dim in twilight's gloom. Foliage shifted from russet to grey as darkness deepened its veil, muting remnants of life's colour without extinguishing it fully. Through mist-glazed panes I spied outlines of trees standing ever resilient, their branches guarding mysteries yet to unfold along winding paths once more trod. Beyond these walls,

romance was not dead—merely slumbering as nature prepared her reawakening. And who was I to deny spring its rebirth, if providence deemed our fates rejoin once more?

For now, the rain falls in sheets beyond the glass, sealing me safely within these walls as the last glow of daylight vanishes. I folded the letter gently and tucked it within my dress pocket, close to my heart. Though the garden sleeps in winter's grip, its soul would stir again with warmer winds. And so too with mine, nourished by dreams of long forgotten memories that lift the spirit above any woe.

For whenever Sofia's words find me, it is as if a flower of hope had bloomed.

Chapter 1

I was only twelve years old at the time. The affair took place in the summer of 1872.

My father was the Counsellor to the British Ambassador in Italy, and we lived in Rome for some time, in the imposing Embassy residence. But during the following summer, they hired a villa on the hill near Castel Gandolfo, a town located some fifteen miles southeast of Rome. Nestled in the midst of leafy hillsides overlooking the tranquil waters of Lake Albano, our idyllic estate provided a picturesque retreat from the noise and commotion of the bustling metropolis.

Though this was a beautiful place to relax, I was expected to keep up with my education even during our holiday respite. However, I possessed little enthusiasm for such academic efforts and was not in a mood for literary pursuits under the green branches of that verdant scenery. With no parental supervision to constrain my wanderings, I had become accustomed to roaming at will. No one restricted my freedom since departing the care of Mademoiselle Léandre, my last French governess, who had quite succumbed to the warmth of the Mediterranean climate *comme une cadavre*, spending her days confined to bed in a state of languid discomfort.

My father treated me in an indifferent yet affectionate manner, the way one would treat a kitten. My dear mother, who had born no other children, devoted herself to diversions such as garden parties and social calls with foreign dignitaries, paying hardly any attention to her only daughter. My father was still a young man, but perpetually busy with his diplomatic duties, when they wed a decade prior to my birth for reasons of propriety. Mother led a melancholy life, often vexed with agitation, jealousy, and discontent, but only when he wasn't around. In his stern and dignified presence, she maintained dutiful silence, clearly intimidated by his calm manners and self-control.

I shall never forget those blissful first weeks I spent at the villa. The skies were radiant and clear. We had departed the city on the sixth of June, the Corpus Domini day. I rambled for hours, sometimes in the lush garden of our villa, sometimes in the gardens of Villa Barberini, and at other times beyond the barriers of the town, along the shores of the lake. I took with me a collection of poems by Wordsworth,

but rarely opened its pages, and instead recited from memory many verses, of which I knew a great quantity by heart.

The imagination was stirring within me, and my heart ached so capriciously and foolishly for something to happen. I remained ever in a state of anticipation, observing everything around me with wonder, and was ready with all my being to seize any diversion that presented itself at a moment's notice. My fancy took flight, playing and drifting swiftly, like martins that fly in circles around a belfry at sunset, hovering ever around one captivating image. But even in spite of my tears and in spite of pensive melancholy inspired by a sorrowful verse or evening's beauty, the joyous feelings of exciting new impressions sprang forth like fresh grass after rain.

I had taken to riding a pony kept at the villa's stables across the pond. It was my custom to saddle it myself and venture forth alone as adventure took me. Riding at a swift gallop, I fancied myself a princess fleeing a sinister villain while the whistling wind wailed in my ears. With face turned to the heavens, I shouted with exaltation as the radiant light and azure shine filled my wide-open soul.

I remember, at that time, the image of a maiden, the phantom of pure love, did scarce appear to my mind in definitive shapes. But in all my thoughts, in everything I felt, lay concealed the oblivious, yet very shameful feeling of desire for something new, inexpressibly sweet, feminine and... forbidden. This intoxicating anticipation permeated my very being. I breathed it—it coursed through my veins with every drop of my blood.

Our villa consisted of a sturdy manor house encased in dressed stone with grand columns, and two outlying wings. In the wing to the left, a modest book printing establishment had been installed. More than once, I ventured there. Ever curious, I observed the labour of a half-dozen gaunt, unkempt young men, clad in soiled smocks, with ruddy faces, working briskly. Operating the wooden levers, and pressing down the square blocks of type by the weight of their stringy bodies, they would print the ant-like letters upon the crisp pages of newly-minted books.

The wing to the right had long stood vacant and awaiting tenants. One day—three weeks past the ninth of June—shutters on the windows of this wing were opened and women's faces made their appearance in their frames. A family of some kind or another had at last taken up residence.

I remember how, that same day at the evening meal, my mother asked our servant about the identities of our new neighbours, and upon hearing the name Contessa Moretti, said first with uncommon dignity, "Ah! A Contessa..." but then added, "She must be of reduced circumstances."

"They arrived in two hired carriages, Madam, with no carriage of their own," remarked the servant, respectfully presenting a dish. "And their furnishings, if I may speak so, are of the plainest sort."

"Yes, yes," returned my mother, "perhaps they are provincial gentry, unacquainted with refined tastes." My father shot her a glance both cold and piercing, and she promptly fell silent.

In truth, Contessa Moretti could scarce afford to maintain her rank, for the cramped and lowly wing she had leased was so aged and small that no people of means would be willing to inhabit it. However, I paid my mother's assumptions no heed. The courtly title had little effect on me for my mind had lately

been filled with visions of class conflicts and the hope for social change after reading Gaskell's novel, *North and South*.

Largely oblivious to my surroundings, each evening found me stealing about in our garden, stick in hand which I ennobled as my sword, standing guard against rooks that with regular monotony and scoundrelly craft savaged our flower beds. A hatred for those wary, rapacious, and sly birds had long kept my youthful spirit in contentious and warlike temper.

On this day of which I speak, I ventured into the garden as usual. After searching all alleys in vain and fruitless effort, for the rooks recognised me and merely cawed at me from a distance, I approached the low fence dividing our courtyard from the narrow garden strip behind the right wing belonging to our new neighbours. Head bowed in thought, I walked along. Suddenly, voices caught my ear. I glanced over the fence with wonder and stood frozen... A strange spectacle presented itself before me.

A stone's throw from me, on the tended grass between green raspberry bushes, stood a young girl, tall and graceful in a velveteen frock of green with a white muslin cap on her head. Around her pressed four young gentlemen, their merry talk and laughter swelling on the summer breeze like a warm melody. In her every motion, which I beheld from profile, dwelt something so bewitching, caressing, mocking, and charming that I near cried out in pleasure and intense wonderment, believing I would give all earthly treasures for but a single blissful moment of those lovely fingers stroking my hair.

My stick slid down on the grass as everything around me dissolved and vanished. With eyes devouring, I beheld that slender waist and snowy neck, those beautiful arms, and hair of ebony slightly ruffled, those intelligent eyes and dark lashes framing a delicate cheek below.

"Little girl! Hey there, little girl!" suddenly spoke a voice near me, "Is it seemly to stare like that at beautiful young ladies?"

I quivered throughout, stupefied... Beside me, but on the other side of the fence, stood a man with closely cropped black hair, regarding me ironically. In that precise moment, the young girl turned her eyes towards me and I beheld two vast, grey orbs within a lively, spirited face—and this face suddenly began to flutter, to laugh, revealing gleaming white teeth as her brows rose in amusement.

I blushed crimson. Retrieving my fallen stick from the ground and, pursued by peals of sympathetic laughter, I ran to my own bedroom. Once inside its safe confines, I flung myself upon the bed, and covered my face with trembling hands. My heart leapt wildly within me. I felt profoundly ashamed yet incredibly happy, as if swept by a strange and unfamiliar emotion.

After I had rested for a while, I tidied myself, brushed my hair, and descended to the main parlour where tea was being served. The vision of the beautiful girl in the garden would not cease floating before me. My heart had eased its manic dance, yet ached in an unusual and unfamiliar fashion.

"What is this, has something happened to you?" my father suddenly asked. "Have you perhaps killed a rook at last?"

I was on the verge of confessing all but held back as blush swept over my cheeks. I merely smiled to myself. Preparing for bed in the evening, I twirled giddily around like a ballerina on one bare foot, but I know no reason why. I slept through the night like a child dead. Towards dawn, I momentarily awoke, raised my head, cast a glance with a gaze of ecstasy—and drifted once more into sleep.

Chapter 2

"How can I get to know them?" was my initial thought, as soon as I woke up in the morning. I ventured into the garden before tea, keeping my distance from the fence, yet encountered no one on their side.

After tea, I strolled multiple times along the street in front of the villa, stealing sly glances at their windows... I thought I discerned the girl's silhouette behind the curtains and retreated as fast as I could.

"We must become friends," I thought to myself, while skipping the sandy expanse before the gardens of Villa Barberini with uneven strides. "But, how? That is the question." The smallest details of our encounter from the previous evening relentlessly surfaced in my mind; her manner of laughter at my expense, for some inexplicable reason, presented itself to me with particular clearness. But as I fretted and devised various ploys, Fate, unbeknownst to me, was already weaving its threads.

During my absence, my mother had received a letter from our new neighbour, inscribed on crisp paper sealed with red wax, a type reserved for official notices and the corks of cheap wines. In this note, composed in a somewhat illiterate style and featuring a careless hand, the old Contessa beseeched my mother for her protection. According to her, my mother was well-acquainted with prominent individuals upon whom the fate of herself and her offspring depended, owing to some highly significant legal disputes.

"I implore you," she wrote, "as a lady of noble standing, to extend your protection. Furthermore, I find it agreeable to avail myself of this opportunity." In conclusion, she sought my mother's permission to pay her a visit.

I discovered my mother in a troubled state of mind. My father was absent, leaving her without a confidant with whom to take counsel. Responding to a letter from a "noble woman," especially one of the Contessa status, was unavoidable, yet the manner of response perplexed her. Crafting a note in English seemed inadvisable, and my mother, not proficient in French or Italian, was acutely aware of her linguistic limitations and was reluctant to compromise herself.

My arrival brought her delight, and she promptly instructed me to visit the Contessa and convey to her in French that she stood ready, to the extent of her abilities, to be of service to Her Radiance. She begged that the Contessa would call upon her at about two o'clock.

This unexpectedly swift realisation of my secret desires both delighted and frightened me, though I concealed the emotions that held sway over me. I retreated to my room, intent on donning a new Pelerine and the white hair ribbon. At home, I often went about in a lightweight floral dress and a pinafore—garments I disliked greatly and found unsuitable for the occasion of my visit.

In the confined and run-down anteroom of our neighbours' wing, which I entered with a tremor coursing through my entire being, I was received by an old, grey-haired butler with skin the hue of tarnished copper, small, surly eyes akin to a pig's, and the deepest furrows on his forehead, unlike any I had ever witnessed. Balancing a platter bearing the gnawed remains of partly eaten fruits and, pushing with his foot the door which led into the adjoining room, he asked impetuously, "What do you want?"

"Is—is Contessa Moretti at home?" I inquired with a trembling voice and eyes downcast, bashfully.

"Salvatore!" screeched a quavering female voice from beyond the door. The servant wordlessly turned his back to me, revealing the worn rear of his coat adorned with a solitary, rusted, armoured button, and departed, abandoning the platter on the floor.

"Have you visited the flower shop?" continued the same female voice. The servant mumbled something in a reply. "Eh?... Someone has arrived?" was the next question... "The young child from next door? Well, invite her in."

"Please enter the drawing-room, Signorina," the servant announced, making his appearance again before me, and retrieving the platter from the floor. I adjusted my dress and stepped into the drawing-room.

I found myself in a tiny and somewhat unkempt apartment, adorned with hastily arranged, shabby furnishings. Seated by the window in a chair with a broken arm was a woman of fifty, with hair uncovered and plain-featured, dressed in an old green gown, with a colourful silk scarf around her neck. Her hazy black eyes bore into me.

Approaching her, I curtsied respectfully.

"Have I the honour of addressing Contessa Moretti?" I queried in French.

"I am Contessa Moretti. And you are the daughter of Mr. Horton?"

"Yes, Madam. My name is Emmeline Horton. I have come bearing a message from my mother."

"Pray, be seated. Salvatore! Where are my spectacles? Have you seen my spectacles?"

I conveyed to Contessa Moretti my mother's response to her note. She listened attentively, tapping the window-pane with her thick, stiff fingers, and upon conclusion, she fixed her gaze on me once more.

"Very well, young lady; I shall certainly attend," she declared eventually. "But how youthful you still are! How many years do you count, dear child? May I inquire?"

"Twelve, Madam," I responded with a hesitant air and cheeks tinged with blush.

The Contessa extracted some crumpled, written documents from her pocket, brought them close to her very nose, and began sifting through them.

"'Tis a good age, dear child," she suddenly pronounced, turning and shifting in her chair. "And please, there is no need to be formal. We are plain folk here."

Too plain, I mused with unintentional dislike rising in me as I surveyed her unassuming figure with a single glance.

At that moment, the opposite door of the drawing-room swung open, and on the threshold emerged the young girl I had seen in the garden the evening before. She stepped inside, and the sweetest smile flitted across her face.

"And here stands my daughter," declared the old Contessa, pointing at her with an elbow. "Sofia, the daughter of our neighbour, Mr. Horton. What is your name again, dear?"

"Em—Emmeline Horton, Madam," I replied, rising and lisping with anguish.

"And your middle name?"

"Charlotte."

"Yes! I once had an acquaintance, a personal assistant of mine, whose name was Charlotte as well. Salvatore! No need to search for the glasses; they're in my pocket."

The young girl continued to regard me with the same smile as before, gently narrowing her eyes and tilting her head ever so slightly to one side.

"I've already met Miss Emmeline," she began. The silvery cadence of her voice sent a shiver through me like a morning chill. "May I call you so?"

"Pray do, Madam," I stammered. "At home, they call me Emmie."

"Where was that?" asked the old Contessa.

The young Contessa offered no response to her mother.

"Are you occupied at present?" she inquired, her gaze fixed unwaveringly on me.

"Not in the least, Madam."

"Then, will you assist me in winding some wool? Come hither to me." She nodded in my direction and gracefully departed the drawing-room with a light step. I followed suit.

The room we entered boasted slightly finer furnishings and was arranged with great taste. Yet, in that moment, my ability to observe such details seemed impaired; I moved as if in a dream, enveloped in a peculiar sense of well-being bordering on a blissful stupor.

Seating herself upon a red brocade chaise lounge, the young Contessa produced a tangle of red wool and gestured for me to take a chair opposite her. In silence, with an undivided focus and the same bright and artful smile playing on her slightly parted lips, she carefully untangled the bundle and placed

it in my hands. As she wound the wool onto a folded card, she suddenly illumined me with such a clear and affectionate glance that caused me to drop my eyes, overwhelmed by a profound sense of embarrassment. When her eyes opened to their fullest, her face became radiant, as though kissed by light itself.

"What were your thoughts of me yesterday, Miss Emmeline?" she inquired after a brief pause. "You must surely have judged me?"

"I... Contessa... I thought nothing... how can I..." I stammered, flustered.

"Please listen," she continued. "You don't know me yet. I desire people always to speak the truth to me. You are twelve, I understand, and I am nineteen; as you can see, I am considerably older than you, and therefore, you must always speak the truth to me... and obey me," she added.

I grew even more abashed, but I still lifted my eyes to meet hers. She smiled, though not like before, but with a distinct and approving grace.

"Look at me," she uttered tenderly, lowering her voice. "How adorable... Your little face is so pretty, it pleases me a lot. And this golden hair of yours is like sunshine on tranquil waters. I foresee that we shall become friends. Would you like that, Miss Emmeline?" she asked cheerfully.

"Contessa..." I began.

"Firstly, call me Sofia; and secondly, what sort of habit is this for children..." She corrected herself, "for young ladies—not to express their feelings straightforwardly and sincerely? You do like me, don't you?"

Although I was happy that she was speaking to me so openly, a trace of awkwardness lingered. I wanted to show her that she was not dealing with a small child and, assuming a composed and earnest demeanour, I replied, "Of course, I like you very much, Sofia! I have no desire to conceal the fact."

She shook her head, pausing occasionally. "Have you a governess?" she suddenly inquired.

"No, I've been without a governess for a while," I lied. Barely a month had passed since I parted ways with my French governess.

"Ah, I see. You're quite grown up."

She lightly slapped me on the fingers. "Hold your hands straight!" Then, engrossed in diligently winding her yarn ball, she continued.

Taking advantage of her lowered gaze, I set on scrutinising her, at first discreetly, then more boldly. Her face appeared even more enchanting than the previous day—everything about it exuded delicacy, intelligence, and loveliness. Seated with her back to the window adorned with a white lace, a ray of sunlight stole through, illuminating her glossy charcoal hair, her translucent, swanlike neck, gentle sloping shoulders, and calm, tender bosom.

I gazed upon her—and how intimate and dear she became to me! It felt as if I had known her for an eternity, and yet, I had known nothing and had not truly lived before her arrival...

She wore a somewhat dark, already worn gown, paired with a bodice, and I felt an urge to tenderly caress every fold of that gown if only I was offered a chance. The tips of her shoes peeked from beneath her dress, and oh, like a gallant squire, I would have bowed down to those little boots.

Here I sit, before her, I thought. I have made her acquaintance... what bliss, my God! I nearly leapt from my chair with delight, but instead, I merely swung my feet to and fro like a small child relishing a treat.

Despite the circumstances, I felt at ease, and I would have liked never to depart from that room for as long as I lived.

Her eyelids lifted slowly, and once again, her luminous eyes shone affectionately before me, and once more, she laughed.

"How you stare at me!" she chuckled, surprised yet happy. "If you were a boy, I would find myself quite embarrassed."

I blushed scarlet, for I knew she understood all, she saw all! Embarrassment of my own now flashed through my thoughts. How could she not perceive and understand everything when my eyes and cheeks betray me so?

Suddenly, a commotion echoed from the adjacent room, followed by the clanking of a sword.

"Sofia!" screeched the old Contessa from the drawing-room. "Rossi has brought you a kitten."

"A kitten!" cried Sofia, springing hurriedly from her chair. She tossed the ball onto my knees and rushed out.

I also stood and, placing the yarn of wool on the window-sill, ventured into the drawing-room, where I came to an abrupt stop in astonishment. In the room's centre lay a kitten with outstretched paws, and Sofia knelt before it, carefully raising its nose. By the side of the young Contessa, almost filling the entire wall space between the windows, stood a fair-looking, curly-haired young cavalryman with a rosy complexion and prominent eyes.

"How farcical!" Sofia kept repeating, "and its eyes are not blue but green, and what huge ears it has! Thank you, Rossi! You are very kind."

The cavalryman, whom I recognised as one of the young men from the previous evening, smiled and bowed, the spurs on his boots clicking and the links of his sword clanking as he did so.

"Yesterday, you expressed a desire for a striped kitten with large ears... so I have procured one, Madam. Your word is my command." And again, he bowed.

The kitten mewed faintly, and began to sniff at the floor.

"It's hungry!" declared Sofia. "Anna! Bring some milk. Quick!"

The chambermaid, dressed in an old linen gown with a faded kerchief on her head, entered with a saucer of milk in hand and placed it before the kitten. The kitten quivered, blinked, and started to lap greedily.

"What a rosy tongue it has," observed Sofia, lowering her head almost to the floor, and glancing sideways at it beneath its very nose.

The kitten drank until it had its fill, and then commenced to purr, lazily contracting and relaxing its paws. Sofia rose to her feet and, facing the maid, said casually, "Take it away."

"Your hand, Madam—in return for the kitten," the cavalryman proposed, revealing his teeth while bending over his entire imposing figure, tightly confined in a new uniform.

"Both hands," responded Sofia, extending her hands to him. While he kissed them, she winked at me over his shoulder.

I stood motionless on one spot, feeling my cheeks growing redder by the minute. Uncertain whether to avert my gaze or rush to her side and snatch her from this unwelcome intruder, I suddenly caught sight of our footman, Theódor, through the open door of the anteroom. He was gesturing me with his hand to follow him. Unwillingly, I went out to him.

"What do you want?" I asked.

"Your mamma has sent for you," he said in a whisper. "She is annoyed because you did not return with an answer."

"Why, have I been here long?"

"More than an hour."

"More than an hour!" I repeated unintentionally. Returning to the drawing-room, I began to curtsy and ingratiate myself for overstaying.

"Where are you going, Miss Emmeline?" the young Contessa queried, glancing at the cavalryman.

"I must return home, Madam. So I am to say," I added, addressing the old woman, "that you will pay us a visit at two o'clock."

"Tell her that, my dear child."

The old Contessa hastily produced her snuffbox and took a pinch so loudly that I practically jumped. "Tell her that," she repeated while tearfully blinking and muttering.

I curtsied once more, then turned, and left the room with the same sense of awkwardness that a young girl feels when she is aware of people scrutinising her behind her back.

"Dear Emmeline, you must drop in to see us again," called Sofia, bursting into laughter once more.

What provokes her laughter incessantly, I pondered as I made my way home, accompanied by Theódor, who said nothing but disapproved silently behind me. My mother scolded me and, with surprise, asked, "What could have kept you so long at the Contessa's?"

I offered no reply and retreated to my own room. A sudden melancholy took hold of me... I attempted to suppress my tears... but I was consumed by jealousy of the cavalryman.

Chapter 3

The old Contessa, true to her pledge, paid a visit to my mother, but found no favour in her eyes. Although I wasn't present when they met, later at the table during our meal, my mother shared with my father her impressions about Contessa Moretti, deeming her a *femme très vulgaire*. My mother expressed profound ennui at the constant pleas urging her to intervene with Lord Edwards. She described the Contessa as entangled in endless legal proceedings and affairs—*des pratiques financières douteuses*—leading her to believe that the Contessa must be a person of questionable character and a great rogue. Nonetheless, my mother, mindful of neighbourly ties and the weight of a name, extended an invitation for the Contessa and her daughter to dine with us the following day.

Upon hearing the mention of *her daughter*, I dropped my nose into my plate in a vain attempt to hide my blushing cheeks. My father, in response, informed my mother that he now remembered the lady's identity. In his youth, he had been acquainted with the late Conte Moretti, a man of superior education but prone to capricious flights of malfeasance. Society had dubbed him *le Parisien* due to his extended residing in the French capital. Despite his alleged affluence, he had squandered his fortune through reckless gambling, the motives of which remained shrouded in mystery. It was likely for the sake of money, speculated my father, with a cold smile, considering the possibility of financial incentives. Conte Moretti had married the daughter of a chancellery clerk and, following their union, engaged in speculative ventures that led to his irrevocable ruin.

"It is a wonder she did not attempt to solicit funds," commented my mother.

"She is quite likely to do so in due course," remarked my father with composure. "Does she possess a command of the French language?"

"Very inadequate one, indeed."

"M-m-m. Nevertheless, that is of no consequence. I believe you mentioned extending the invitation to her daughter. I have been assured that she is a most charming and well-educated young lady."

"Ah! Then she does not inherit her mother's traits."

"Nor her father's," retorted my father. "He, too, was well-educated but a man of limited intelligence."

A sigh escaped my mother, and a pensive mood settled upon her. My father lapsed into silence, and I found myself exceeding awkward throughout their conversation.

After dinner, I ventured into the courtyard, but without my stick-sword. Although I had pledged my word to steer clear of the Morettis' garden, an irresistible compulsion drew me there, and it turned out to be worthwhile. No sooner had I approached the fence than I caught glimpse of Sofia. This time she was unaccompanied. A small book graced her delicate hands as she ambled leisurely along the path, oblivious to my presence. Remaining nearly unnoticed while she slipped past me, a speck of pollen happened to tickled my nose and I sneezed.

She turned around, but without pausing, gracefully pushed aside the broad red ribbon of her dress. Casting a fleeting smile my way, she once again immersed herself in her book.

I pulled off my round straw hat, and after fidgeting in place for a moment, I contemplated approaching her with more resolute courage. However, she remained indifferent, raised her book once more, and sauntered away.

With a heavy heart, I decided to let her be, and departed. *Que suis-je pour elle?* I pondered in French.

The ensuing evening and the following day unfolded in a melancholic stupor. Despite my attempts at study, I found no solace in the verses of Wordsworth's poems. In vain did printed lines and ivory pages of the famous text flit before my eyes. The words, "*I wandered lonely as a cloud, That floats on high o'er vales and hills,*" paraded before my eyes without grasp or meaning. In frustration, I cast the book aside. Just before descending for dinner, I brushed my hair once more, and again donned my Pelerine and the white hair ribbon.

"What's the purpose of this attire?" asked my mother. "You're not even a student yet, and God knows whether your father will permit you to continue your education. This garment was made not very long ago and is hardly worn. You mustn't soil it!"

"We are having guests," I pleaded, almost in despair.

"Nonsense! What kind of guests are they?"

Reluctantly yielding to my mother's whims, I exchanged the Pelerine for a plain pinafore, but adamantly retained my white hair ribbon.

The Contessa and her daughter made their appearance half an hour before the dinner. The old woman draped a yellow shawl over her familiar green gown, paired with an antiquated mobcap adorned with ribbons of fiery hue. Without delay, she launched into discourse concerning her promissory notes, lamenting her destitution with a persistence that bordered on importunity. Ceremonious niceties held no sway over her, and she indulged in noisy snuff-taking, fidgeting, and wriggling in her chair as she had done on previous occasions. It seemed a concept foreign to her that she bore the title of Contessa.

Contrastingly, Sofia assumed an air of stiffness, bordering on haughtiness, befitting a true young Contessa. A feeling of cold detachment and dignity adorned her features, rendering her almost unrecognisable. In this new guise, she appeared remarkably beautiful. Wearing a thin barège gown

adorned with pale-blue flowers, her hair cascaded in long curls along her cheeks, following the English fashion. This coiffure complemented the unusually cold expression gracing her face.

Seated next to her during dinner, my father, with his composed courtesy, extended his attention to his neighbour. My mother, on the other hand, intermittently cast strange and almost hostile glances in Sofia's direction, observing her with a peculiar rancour, while Sofia remained blissfully oblivious to the probing eyes fixed upon her.

Their conversation unfolded in French. I found myself once again surprised by the purity of Sofia's accent. The old Contessa, true to her form, exhibited not the slightest degree of restraint during the dinner, indulging herself in hearty eating and lavishing praise upon the fare. My mother found her, if not annoying, then evidently wearisome, for she responded with a monotone indifference, while my father furrowed his brows in vague frown from time to time.

Much to my dismay, my mother harboured the same dislike of Sofia, as much as she did for the old Contessa.

"She's a haughty young lassie," she declared the following day. "And when one reflects upon it, what is there for her to be proud of? *Avec ses cheveux noirs comme une sorcière!*"

"Evidently, you've not encountered any *sorcières*," my father interjected.

"And thank God, I have not! Only you are fit to pass judgement on them."

Sofia, throughout, paid me no attention whatsoever. Shortly after dinner, the old Contessa began to take her leave.

"I shall rely upon your protection, Mr. and Mrs. Horton," she melodically chimed to my father and mother. "What is to be done! I have witnessed prosperous days, but now they are gone. Here I stand, a radiance of faded glory and former prosperity now diminished," she added, punctuating her words with an unpleasant laugh. "But what good is honour when you have nothing to eat?"

My father, ever respectful, bowed in response and escorted her to the anteroom door. I lingered there in my plain pinafore, staring at the floor as if condemned to death. Sofia's unmistakable and complete indifference towards me had rendered me utterly heartbroken.

What, then, was my astonishment when, as she passed me by, she hastily whispered in my ear, with her initial affectionate expression evident in her eyes. "Come to us at seven o'clock, do you hear? Without fail..."

I could only gape in astonishment with my hands thrown apart, for she was already retreating, with a white scarf thrown over her head.

Chapter 4

Precisely as the clock struck seven, I entered the tiny corridor leading to the Contessa's wing. I was dressed in my summer frock and pinafore, with my hair brushed so it flowed down my back in bright locks. The old servant cast a surly gaze upon me, grudgingly rising from his bench. A medley of lively voices resounded from the drawing-room, and when I swung open the door, I retreated a pace as scene of bewildering spectacle unfolded before me. In the middle of the room, standing on a chair, the young Contessa held a top hat in front of her. Encircling her were five men, attempting to dip their hands into the hat, yet she persistently kept raising it higher and out of their reach, all the while vigorously shaking its contents.

After catching a glimpse of me, she exclaimed, "Stop! Stop! Our new guest has arrived. She must be given a token," and with nimble grace, she descended from her chair, and embraced me around the shoulders. "Come along, Emmie," she uttered joyfully, "why do you stand there? Messieurs, permit me to introduce you. This is Mademoiselle Emmeline, the daughter of our neighbour. And this," she continued, turning towards me and in turn pointing the assembled visitors, "is Conte Alfieri, Doctor Falcone, the poet Gauthier, retired Captain Orlov, and Rossi the cavalryman, whom you have encountered before. I beg you all to honour mutual regard and favour each other."

So confused was I that I failed to even offer a curtsy. In Doctor Falcone, I recognised the very sombre gentleman who had heartlessly embarrassed me in the garden, while the others remained strangers to me.

"Conte!" persisted Sofia, "Compose a token for Miss Emmeline."

"That would be unjust," rejoined the Conte, with a discernible accent, a very attractive and flamboyantly dressed man, endowed with a tanned complexion, expressive brown eyes, a delicate, pallid nose, and a slender moustache above his pinched mouth. "Miss Emmeline has not participated in forfeit games with us thus far."

"'Tis unjust," reiterated Rossi and the gentleman identified as the retired Captain, a man of forty, with a weathered face from years of service, his stern expression softened slightly by greying temples.

"Write a token, I insist," the Contessa persisted. "What kind of insurrection is this? Miss Emmeline is our guest for the first time, and today no law applies to her. No more excuses and grumbling. I command you to write it—I will have it so."

The Conte, with a shrug of his shoulders, yet bowing his head submissively, grasped a pen in his white, ring-adorned hand, tore a fragment of paper, and commenced to inscribe upon it.

"Allow me, at least, to explain to Miss Emmeline the nature of what it is all about," Falcone interjected, adopting a sarcastic tone. "Otherwise, the child shall find herself utterly at a loss. You see, young lady, we engage in the play of forfeits. The Contessa must impose a penalty, and the fortunate owner of the drawn ticket is obliged to bestow a kiss upon her hand. Do you understand what I have told you?"

I merely cast a glance in his direction and remained standing, enveloped in a fog-like confusion. The Contessa once again leaped upon the chair and recommenced the vigorous shaking of the hat. Everyone extended their hands toward her, myself included.

"Gauthier!" the Contessa addressed the tall young man of a gaunt face, tiny, weasel-like eyes, and exceedingly long, russet hair, "You, being a poet, ought to exhibit kindness and relinquish your token to Miss Emmeline, affording her two chances instead of one."

However, Gauthier refused by shaking his head stubbornly and tossing his hair rebelliously. I extended my hand into the hat after all the rest, drew out and unfolded a token... Oh, Lord! What tempestuous emotions surged within me when I behold on it—*Kiss!*

"Kiss?" escaped my lips unconsciously.

"Bravo! She has triumphed," echoed the Contessa. "How delighted I am!" Descending from the chair upon which she stood, she gazed into my eyes with such clarity and sweetness that my heart erupted with joy. "And are you pleased, dear Emmie?" she inquired of me.

"I—?" I faltered.

"Sell me your token," Rossi suddenly blurted out, right beside my ear. "I'll offer you ten lire for it."

I retorted to the cavalryman with such a wrathful glare, it prompted Sofia to clap her hands, and Falcone to exclaim, "A feisty young lady, indeed!"

"But," he continued, "in my role as master of ceremonies, I am obligated to ensure that all the regulations are followed. Miss Emmeline, assume a posture by bending your knee. That is our rule."

Sofia stood before me, her head slightly inclined to one side, seemingly to scrutinise me better. With dignified composure, she extended her hand. A haze enveloped my vision. Attempting to comply with the prescribed gesture, I attempted to kneel on one knee, but inadvertently plumped down on both, clumsily pressed my lips against Sofia's fingers, and grazed the tip of my nose against her gold bracelet.

"Excellent!" exclaimed Falcone, lending a helping hand for me to rise.

The game of forfeits continued. Sofia drew me protectively close to herself. The penalties invented were diverse and imaginative. Among them, she assumed the role of a statue, selecting the dignified yet unassuming Orlov as her pedestal, and directing him to recline on the floor and conceal his face into his breast.

The laughter persisted without respite. The clamour, uproar, and revelry, this unceremonious, almost riotous festivity, these unprecedented connections with strangers, overwhelmed me. I was a girl reared in sobriety and solitude while growing up within the confines of a stately home of gentry. Yet here, I found myself simply intoxicated, as if by the influence of wine. I joined in the uproarious laughter and engaged in more spirited chatter than the rest, to the extent that even the elderly Contessa, seated in the adjacent room with sort of pettifogger from Milano who had been summoned for consultation, emerged

to cast a curious glance in my direction. Still, I felt incredibly happy, and frankly, I didn't care at all about anyone making fun of me or giving me sidelong glances.

Sofia persistently flaunted a preference for me, ensuring I remained closely by her side at all times. In one forfeit, I sat beside her, while we were confined under the same silk mantle. Tasked with divulging my secret, I remember how our two heads found themselves veiled in a stifling, semi-transparent, fragrant haze; how close and gently her eyes sparkled in that shadow, and how warmly her parted lips breathed against my neck. Her teeth shone white, and the tips of her hair tickled and scorched my ear. I maintained a hushed silence. She smiled mysteriously but tenderly, eventually whispering, "Well, what is it?"

Yet, I merely blushed like an Italian tomato, my mouth agape in resounding silence. I turned away, struggling to draw a breath.

In due course, we grew tired of forfeits and moved on to playing *string*. What an array of pranks we indulged in that very evening! We played on the old spinet piano, sang tunes, danced, and then enacted an impromptu gypsy camp. Gauthier, whom we dressed up like a bear, was fed with water and bread for our amusement. Conte Alfieri astounded us with sleight-of-hand card tricks, ending in a masterful feat of stacking the cards and dealing himself all the trumps at whist.

Gauthier recited fragments from his poem, *The Vampiress*, which was intended for publication in a sombre binding, with the title rendered in bloodlike letters. We took the hat from the knees of the Milano pettifogger and made him dance to get it back.

Old Salvatore found himself adorned in a mobcap, while Sofia put on a man's top hat... It is impossible to chronicle all the antics we did that evening. Captain Orlov, alone, remained confined to a corner, vexed and scowling... At times, his eyes glowed with intensity, his face suffused with crimson, appearing on the verge of descending upon us, scattering us like leaves. It was only Contessa's stern glance cast his way, her finger shaking menacingly at him, that made him once again retreat to his corner.

Exhaustion eventually overcame us. The old Contessa, capable of confronting and facing any circumstance or challenge, as she declared, was undisturbed by the clamour, yet fatigue settled upon her, and she yearned for repose.

At the stroke of midnight, a modest supper was laid out for us. Aged, dry cheese and a handful of chilled pasties filled with minced ham, to us resembled more flavoursome delicacy than any elaborate banquet. A lone bottle of wine, of questionable vintage, stood before us. Dark and suspect, its contents left a faint echo of pinkish dye in its taste.

Fatigued yet happy to the point of weariness, I emerged from the Villa. Embracing Sofia good night, I reluctantly parted from her arms just as a storm seemed to brew on the horizon. The black clouds expanded, shifting across the sky with visible commotion in their turbid outlines. A gentle breeze rustled nervously through the dark trees, and beyond the horizon, thunder grumbled with a muted, discontented tone, angrily and deeply, as if murmuring to itself.

I found my way through the back entrance to my bedroom. Our household servant slept in the parlour, obliging me to step beside him, which woke him up as I tiptoed my way. Upon noticing me, he relayed that my mother was displeased, and dare he say, angry with me. It was deemed improper for a young lady of my years to linger unaccompanied at such a late hour. She had contemplated sending for me again, but my father intervened to dissuade her.

I never before went to sleep without bidding my mother good night and seeking her blessing. Nothing could be done about it! I informed the servant that I would retire for the night on my own and extinguished the candle. However, I neither undressed nor took to my bed.

Seated upon a chair, I lingered for a long time, as though enchanted by sensations which I felt were so new to me, so sweet, so cherished... and yet, invoked a feeling of lingering doubt inside me. I remained seated, scarcely seeing my surroundings, motionless, breathing unhurriedly, and only trembling silently at my recollection. Inwardly, a chill gripped me at the realisation that love had taken hold within me—that here it was, that love I listened and read about for so long. Sofia's radiant face shimmered gently before me in the darkness—hovering but not fading away. A touch of her hand. A brush against my cheek. Her lips still poised in their mysterious smile, and her eyes regarded me slightly askance, inquisitive, contemplative, and tender, much as she had been at the moment of our parting.

At last, I rose on tiptoe, approached my bed, and cautiously, without disrobing, rested my head on the pillow, as if seeking not to startle away the joy with which I was laden to overflowing.

I lay down, but couldn't close my eyes. In time, I became aware of faint reflections intruding into my bedroom. Lifting myself, I peered out of the window. Its frame stood distinctly outlined against the mysteriously and chaotically sparking glass.

"'Twas the thunderstorm", I surmised, and indeed, a storm raged, but it had passed far away, so that even its thunderous echoes eluded awe and fright. Only across the heavens, prolonged, indistinct, branching flashes of lightning incessantly illuminated the sky. They didn't merely flash; rather, they quivered and twitched, resembling the wings of a dying bird.

I stepped out of the bed, approached the window, and lingered there until the break of dawn. The lightning flashes persisted, never ceasing for a moment. Outside, it was a night as dark as the grave itself. My gaze fixed upon the sombre, sandy plain, the shadowy expanse of Villa Barberini's gardens, and the yellowish façades of distant houses, all seemingly trembling with every faint flash. I stared, unable to tear myself away. Those luminous lightning flashes, those fiery gleams slicing through the dark skies like daggers, appeared to echo the tumultuous beats of my own wild heart, yearning for release.

As morning began to unveil, dawn emerged in scarlet patches. With the sun's ascent, the lightning flashes grew weaker and fainter. They quivered less frequently, until they vanished at last, drowned in the clear and sobering light of the breaking day.

And within me, my lightning flashes died also. A profound weakness and tranquillity enveloped me, yet Sofia's ethereal image lingered triumphantly over my soul. That vision alone remained calm, like a

swan in flight above marshy sedges, distancing itself from the ignoble figures surrounding it. As sleep claimed me, I bowed down before it one last time in farewell and confiding adoration.

Chapter 5

On the following morning, when I went downstairs for breakfast, my mother scolded me, though not as much as I thought she would. She demanded an explanation of my actions and the reason for my absence from our home the night before. I gave a short explanation, leaving out many details. I tried to embellish my story with the perfect innocence, while hoping to show I wasn't trying to deceive.

"Nevertheless, they are not people *de notre classe*," observed my mother. "And I wish you would expend your energies on improvements befitting a young lady, rather than seek the company of those below our station."

Realising that my mother's concern resided within these obstinate sentiments, I deemed it unnecessary to offer any further reply. However, after breakfast, my father took me to his knee while seated on the bench in the garden, and made me tell him everything I had done and seen at the Morettis'.

A strange and deep bond existed between my father and myself, though it was difficult to define. He showed little interest in my education and hardly ever imposed punishment on me. He respected my liberty with uncommon courtesy. Yet an invisible barrier prevented true intimacy, for though I loved and admired him greatly, the aloofness in his manner rarely allowed me to get emotionally close to him.

However, when he wished, he possessed the ability to evoke in me an instantaneous, boundless confidence with a single word or gesture. My soul opened to him, and I shared my thoughts with him as one would with an indulgent friend, or as with an intelligent mentor. Yet, with the same abruptness, he would withdraw. He seemed to me a good father, and I should have been devotedly attached to him, had I not constantly felt his hand warding me off.

At times, a spell of happiness came over him, and then he would frolic and play with me as if he were a boy again. However, this mirth and tenderness dissipated as swiftly as they had manifested, leaving no trace. The transient moments we shared afforded me no solace for the future. It was as though I had glimpsed our bond only in a dream.

Reflecting in later years, as I pondered my father's nature, I came to the conclusion that he wanted me to be myself to the fullest extent, yet simultaneously did not care so much for me, lest he smothered my instincts. Much like myself, he cherished something distinctly different, relishing it with unabated enthusiasm.

"Seize what you can for yourself, Emmie, and do not give into anyone's power. The art of life consists in upholding to one's self," he once advised me. His meaning remained unclear at the time, but later I saw the wisdom in defining oneself through one's own experiences.

I recounted for my father in detail my visit with the Moretti family. Seated on a bench in the garden, he listened with only partial attention, occasionally distracted as he traced figures in the sand with the tip of his riding-whip. Now and then he would laugh, casting glances at me in a quizzical, amused sort of manner, prodding me on by brief questions and exclamations to continue my tale.

Initially, I could not bring myself even to utter Sofia's name, but my restraint waned, and I set about praising her virtues, describing our moments of teasing kisses and playful embraces. My father continued to laugh, but a pensive air overcame him, prompting him to lower his gaze and rise to his feet.

I recalled that, upon emerging from the house, he had instructed his horse to be saddled.

"Shall I ride with you, papa?" I begged him hopefully.

"No," came his brief reply, his face reverting to its usual indifferent expression. "Go alone, if you wish, but inform the coachman that I shall not accompany you."

With that, he turned away, striding briskly. I followed him with my eyes until he vanished beyond the gate, his hat gradually disappearing along the fence as he made his way to town, and did not return home until evening had descended.

After finishing our evening meal, I ventured once more to the Moretti's home. No one greeted me in the parlour except the elderly Contessa, engaged as ever with her knitting. Upon sighting me, she scratched her head beneath her cap using the end of her knitting-needle and abruptly inquired if I would be so kind as to transcribe a petition for her.

"It would be my pleasure, Madam," I responded, taking a seat on the edge of a chair.

"Only pray, take care to form the letters as large as possible. These old eyes fail me in my age," the Contessa urged, extending a sheet of haphazardly scrawled paper. "And could you manage it today, my dear child?"

"I shall transcribe it this very day, Madam."

The door to the adjoining room creaked open ever so slightly, revealing Sofia's face in the gap. She appeared pallid and contemplative, her hair negligently arranged on her back. Silently, she regarded me with her large, cold eyes, before gently withdrawing and closing the door behind her.

"Sofia, hey there, Sofia!" the old woman called.

But, Sofia didn't reappear. I returned home with the Contessa's petition, dedicating the entire evening by lamplight to the task at hand.

Chapter 6

My *passion* kindled on that particular day. An intensity that swept through me brought something of that which a child must feel when she enters this age, this threshold of adolescence. Perhaps, childhood had already relinquished its hold, for love had taken root within me. The beginning of my passion, as I have already said, unfolded from that fateful day, intertwining inexorably with the onset of my sufferings.

In Sofia's absence, I languished. An apathy enveloping my thoughts, causing every endeavour to slip through my grasp. Days passed in which I dwelt upon her with unwavering intensity... In her absence, I withered... Yet, in her presence, I was no more at ease. The pangs of jealousy gripped me, acknowledging my own insignificance. I foolishly sulked and bashfully fawned. But still, an irresistible force drew me towards her, and every time I crossed the threshold of her sanctum resulted in an instant surge of happiness.

I don't know how, but Sofia divined that I had fallen in love with her in no time. I never intended to conceal the fact from her, yet she mocked my every sincerest affection, played tricks on me, and alternately indulged and tormented me. It is a seductive privilege to be the solitary source, the tyrannical and irresponsible cause for another's greatest joys and deepest sorrows, and I was as malleable as wax in Sofia's playful hands.

However, it was obvious to me that my affection for Sofia was not a solitary occurrence—I was not the only one who was in love with her charming presence. A retinue of men who were in the habit of visiting her home were ensnared by her bewitching allure. She held them all in thrall at her feet, delighting in provoking their hopes and fears, manipulating them at her whim, twisting them about at her caprice. And willingly compliant, they never entertained the thought of resistance. In her lively and beautiful being, there existed a captivating concoction of cunning and nonchalance, artifice and simplicity, tranquillity and playfulness. A delicate charm, coupled with a personal, effervescent energy, permeated everything she did or said. And her face, too, underwent perpetual transformation and radiance, concurrently expressing derision, contemplation, and passion. The treasure trove of emotions, ephemeral as the shadows cast by clouds on a sunlit, breezy day, flitted ceaselessly across her eyes and lips.

Every one of her devotees held an essential place in her regard. Rossi, whom she would on occasion refer to as her "feral savage," demonstrated a willingness to hurl himself into the very flames for her sake. Disdaining to rely solely on his intellectual prowess and other virtues, he persistently proposed marriage, insinuating that the proposals made by the others were but idle prattle.

Gauthier, responded to the poetic harmonies of her soul. A man of reserved temperament, characteristic of many a writer, he fervently professed his adoration for her. In endless verses, he sang her praises, reciting them with an unnatural yet genuine enthusiasm. And she, in turn, entertained an interest in him, lightly mocking him, while harbouring scant belief in his sincerity, and after enduring his effusions, she made him read Keats and recite Byron, in order, as she said, to purify the air.

Falcone, the sneering doctor of poisonous wit and cynical in speech, possessed the deepest understanding of her, and harboured the most profound love, despite openly berating her both to her face and behind her back. She disdained him yet refused to release him from her grasp. At times, with a peculiar, malicious pleasure, she would make him keenly aware that he rested within the palm of her hands.

"I am a *soubrette*, I am heartless, I am an actress by nature," she declared to him one day in my presence; "and so be it! Give me your hand, and I shall thrust a pin into it. You shall feel the sting and be ashamed before this young girl. It will hurt, Mr. Proud Man. Nevertheless, you will be so good as to laugh."

Falcone, ablaze with crimson, averted his gaze and bit his lips, yet ultimately extended his hand. She pricked it, and, despite himself, he burst into laughter. She, too, laughed, thrusting the pin cruelly, all the while gazing into his eyes as he struggled in vain to avert his glance.

The complexities of the relationship between Sofia and Conte Alfieri eluded my comprehension most of all. That he was handsome, skilful, and clever was apparent even to me, a child of twelve. However, a distinct sense of falseness, a certain questionable trait, clung to him, and I dismayed that Sofia remained oblivious to it.

Perhaps, in truth, she did detect that subtle disloyalty and it did not repel her. An irregular education, haphazard upbringing, peculiar acquaintances, the constant company of her mother, and the destitution and disorder within the household cultivated in her a certain half-scornful indifference. The very freedom the young girl enjoyed and the consciousness of her own superiority to the people who surrounded her perhaps contributed to a lack of scrupulous standards. Regardless of the circumstance—whether Salvatore reported a shortage of sugar, or some petty piece of gossip surfaced, or visitors quarrelled among themselves—she merely tossed her curls and declared, "Nonsense!" showing little distress over it.

Conversely, I would begin to seethe whenever Alfieri drew near her, deftly swaying his body like a cunning fox, leaning elegantly over the back of her chair, and begin whispering in her ear with a smug and lascivious smile. She, in turn, would fold her arms upon her breast, gaze intently at him, and respond with a smiling face, all the while shaking her head.

"Why do you suffer Alfieri's company?" I questioned her one day.

"Well, he has such exquisite eyes," she retorted. "But that is none of your concern, Miss Emmeline."

"You must not think that I am in love with him," she remarked on another occasion. "No; I cannot love those I am compelled to look down upon. I need someone who can feel my passion... And such a person, I fear, I shall not encounter, for God is merciful! I shall spare no one who falls into my clutches!"

"Are you saying that you will never fall in love?"

"And what of you, dear, little Emmeline? Do I not love you?" she said, tapping my nose with the tip of her glove.

Indeed, Sofia amused herself a great deal at my expense. For the span of three weeks, I saw her every day, and her capricious antics showed no bounds. Oh, the things she subjected me to! She came to us rarely, but I did not mind the absence of her company. Within our rooms, she behaved like a proper young lady befitting the title of the Contessa. I tried to avoid her every time, afraid of betraying my feelings for her to my mother, who disliked Sofia greatly and kept a close eye upon us.

I was not so much afraid of my father. He seemed oblivious to my existence, and engaged very little with Sofia, but when he did, it bore a peculiarly cynical and distrustful tone. I ceased my regular strolls about the outskirts of our villa, abandoning both play and reading. Even my regular rides on my pony came to a halt. Like a butterfly tied by the leg, I incessantly hovered around the Contessa's garden. I believe I would have liked to linger there forever... but such an innocuous want proved impossible.

My mother voiced her displeasure with my behaviour, and at times, Sofia's mother would ask me to leave. On such occasions, I shut myself up in my bedroom, or ventured to the farthest end of the garden. There, atop the ruins of a crumbling stone hothouse, I sat with my legs dangling over the wall, staring into the void for hours without seeing anything. White butterflies flitted lazily amidst the nettles beside me. An audacious sparrow, perched not far off on the half-demolished red bricks, twittered in an irksome manner, ceaselessly twisting its entire body and fanning out its tail. The ever-distrustful rooks cried out sporadic caws from their perch high, high above me on the bare crest of a birch tree.

The hot Italian sun and the gentle breeze played through the sparse branches, while the calm and melancholy chime of bells from the Chiesa di San Paolo occasionally reached my ears. I sat there, staring and listening, succumbing to a nameless sensation that enveloped everything. Was it sadness and joy, or a premonition of the future, or melding of the desire and fear of life into one, I cannot be certain. I understood nothing at the time of all that which was stirring within me, or I would have called it all by one name—the name of Sofia.

Yet, Sofia persisted in toying with me as a cat plays with a mouse. On occasion, she would flirt with me, showering my face with kisses and embracing me as if I were her dearest plaything. I would become flustered and melt with emotion within her arms. However, at other times, she sternly pushed me away, saying that two girls should not be as intimate with each other as we were, and how I should wait for a boy to fall in love with me. I dared not approach her, dared not even to cast a glance in her direction, when such mood befell her.

I remember a period when she remained exceptionally distant and cold for several days in succession. I quivered with worry, and when timidly I ventured towards their wing to see her, I tried to stay close to the old Contessa, despite her vehement scolding and raucous exclamations just at that time because she had two scenes with the pettifogger from Milano and her affairs connected with her petitions were going badly.

One day, strolling through the garden past the familiar fence, I caught sight of Sofia. Propped up on both arms, she sat motionless on the grass. I tried to withdraw before she saw me, but she suddenly

raised her head and gestured for me to approach closer. Initially perplexed by her gesture, I failed to understand her request. Repeating her call, she waved me to come closer. Overcoming my confusion, I sprang over the fence and ran towards her with joy, only to be halted by a stern look as she pointed to a spot on the path a couple of paces away.

In my confusion, uncertain of what to do, I knelt down on the edge of the path. She appeared so pale, such bitter grief and such profound weariness were revealed in her every feature, that my heart contracted within me, and I whispered against my will, "What has happened to you?"

"Do you love me very much, Emmie?" she asked suddenly. "Yes?"

I offered no response. What response was there for me to make?

"Yes," she repeated, gazing tenderly at me as before. "I can see it in your eyes," she added, growing pensive and covering her face with her hands. "It's not like theirs, these earnest men, each bearing a bouquet of roses and a symphony of stolen words. Their eyes don't shine with love but with the conviction of winning my affections when my heart seeks solace in silent joys," she spoke. "I would like to run to the remotest corners of the world if I could. I cannot endure this any more, I cannot forgive myself... I long for the courage to reveal my soul, to paint my desires in colours of authenticity, not in the agony of expectations. What lies ahead for me? Ah, my life is filled with lies and sorrow, while my heart is breaking!"

"But why, Sofia? How can I make you feel better?" I asked her fearfully.

Sofia remained silent, merely shaking her head. I continued to kneel and gaze at her with profound sadness. Every word of hers cut deep into my heart. At that moment, I believe I would willingly have given my life to shield her from grieving.

I continued to gaze at her from beneath my straw hat. At the time, when I was still veiled in my youthful innocence, I lacked the understanding of why her heart was breaking. Could we not find perfect happiness in each other's arms? What was the unspoken abyss that held us apart?

I remember, with vivid detail, how, overtaken by uncontrollable sorrow, she had suddenly walked into the garden and collapsed on the earth as if felled by some unseen force. Shades of bright and green enveloped her. The breeze rustled in the foliage of the trees, occasionally rocking a branch of raspberries over her head. Doves cooed in the distance, and bees hummed as they flitted low over the scanty grass. Above us, the sky shone blue—but I was filled with sadness...

"Recite some poetry to me," said Sofia in a quiet whisper, leaning on her elbow. "I enjoy hearing you recite verses. You make them go in a sing-song voice, but I like it that way; it's youthful, and... I love listening to your voice. Recite to me *Whispers of a Rose*. Only, sit down first, here by my side."

I took a seat beside her and recited *Whispers of a Rose*.

"*Inescapable is the embrace of love's tender sway*," repeated Sofia. "That is why poetry is so beautiful. It reveals to us possibilities which do not exist in the real word—that it is impossible not to love. I would like to, but I can not!"

Once again, she fell into a pensive silence, then abruptly started and rose to her feet. "Come along, dear Emmie. Gauthier is sitting with mamma. He brought his poem to me, but I left him. He also is embittered now... how can it be helped? Some day you will find out, darling... but you must not be angry with me!"

Sofia hastily squeezed me to herself, planted a kiss on my forehead, and ran on ahead. We returned to the wing, where Gauthier commenced reading us his poem, *The Vampiress*. It had only recently been printed, but I hardly paid any attention. He shrieked out his verses in a raspy voice, the rhymes alternating and jingling like broken glass, hollow and loud, but throughout, my gaze remained fixed on Sofia, striving to understand the meaning of her bitter words.

*"Oh, might it be, a clandestine lover
Hath unexpectedly thy heart stolen?"*

...suddenly exclaimed Gauthier through his nose—and Sofia's eyes met mine. She lowered hers and blushed ever so faintly. I saw that she was blushing, and a cold shiver ran through me. I had never been in love until now, but at that moment, the thought that she is the one who had fallen in love flashed through my mind.

Chapter 7

My real tortures began from that very moment. I racked my brains, pondered and reflected, all the while observing Sofia as discreetly as possible. It was evident a certain change had taken place in her. She would venture off alone for extended walks, lingering in solitude. On occasion, she would shun the presence of her visitors, immersing herself for hours in her room. This had not been her habit until recently. I found myself consumed by an intense curiosity. Is it possible that she loves me instead of one of her admirers, I asked myself with trepidation while mentally navigating from one of her male patron to another. Conte Alfieri seemed to me more dangerous than the others.

My powers of observation extended no further than the tip of my own nose, and my deception likely failed to deceive anyone. If no one else, it was surely Doctor Falcone who promptly saw right through me. Not only that, but he too had undergone a change of late. He had lost weight, and his laughter, though as frequent as ever, now bore a duller and more spiteful quality. In fact, what had formerly been his light irony and feigned cynicism, had now given way to an involuntary and nervous irritability.

"Why do you forever hover about, young lady?" he chided me one day, finding ourselves alone in the drawing-room of the Morettis. The young Contessa had not yet returned from her stroll, and the shrill voice of the old Contessa reverberated from the upper story amidst a quarrel with her maid. "You should be attending to your studies or playing with other children. But instead, what occupies your time?"

"You cannot tell whether I attend to my studies at home," I retorted, not without a measure of arrogance, yet also not without a hint of embarrassment.

"Much study you do! It's not academic pursuits that preoccupy your little head. Well, I shall not contest the matter. At your age, such inclinations are only natural. However, your chosen path is far from a happy one. Can't you see you will bring shame to your family if you continue to pursue this charade?"

"I do not understand you," I remarked.

"You do not understand me? So much the worse for you. I consider it my obligation to caution you. Men like myself, confirmed bachelors, may linger in these quarters. What harm can befall us? We are a calloused lot—our hides are impenetrable. But being a young lady, this peculiar... *fancy*... you hold for our Contessa may prove to be harmful to you more than you anticipate. Believe me, I speak as a doctor. It is an unhealthy predisposition that has captured your heart. I have witnessed in my time how these affairs end, and it is not a favourable outcome for either party."

"How so?"

"Because such are the customs we hold on to. Is what you are experiencing good for you, or beneficial in any way? Is it desirable for the well-being of all parties involved? Or will it lead to ruin and sorrow?"

"But what am I experiencing?" I asked, yet deep in my heart's secret I knew that the doctor was right.

"Ah, dear child, dear child," the doctor continued, with an expression on his face suggesting a deep insult was directed towards me by invoking those two words. "There is no use in your masquerade, for what resides in your soul still shows on your face. And, thank God for that! But why engage in argument? I would not have come here myself were I not such an ardent fellow. Yet, what perplexes me is this—how do you not see the futility of your infatuation?"

"But what is futile about my presence here?" I protested, my interest piqued.

The doctor regarded me with a sneering compassion.

"A fine situation I find myself in," he mused, as if conversing with himself. "What possessed me to say that to her? Allow me to exemplify," he added, raising his voice, "The atmosphere here is not healthy for you, young lady. You may find it delightful, and no doubt! The scent of a hothouse is delightful as well—but one cannot live in it! Listen to my advice and return to your studies. What you do here is *impiorum mores*, my child. *Impiorum mores!*"

The old Contessa entered and began complaining to the doctor of toothache. Soon after, Sofia made her appearance.

"Here," interjected the old Contessa, "scold her, doctor, do. She drinks iced water all day long. Is that a healthy habit for someone with a frail constitution like hers?"

"Why do you engage in such a practice?" inquired Falcone.

"But what consequence could it possibly have?" replied Sofia.

"What consequence? You may catch a cold and die in a matter of days."

"Indeed? Is that possible? Very well, then—that suits me just fine!"

"You don't say!" exclaimed the doctor as the old Contessa departed.

"I do indeed say so," retorted Sofia. "Is life such a delightful affair? Look around you... Well—is it delightful? Or do you presume that I am oblivious to it, that I do not perceive it? It gives me pleasure to indulge in iced water, and can you seriously convince me that such a life is too precious for me to endanger it for a moment's pleasure? I do not speak of happiness, mind you, Doctor Falcone, only pleasure."

"Well, yes," remarked Falcone. "Caprice and independence... Those two words sum you up perfectly. Your entire being resides in those two words."

Sofia burst into a sneering laughter.

"You're quite an inadequate observer, my dear doctor. Your powers of deduction are lacking; you are falling behind. Perhaps you need your spectacles. I am not in the mood for caprices now. How delightful it would be to play pranks on you or on myself! And as for my independence... Miss Emmeline!" Sofia added, suddenly stamping her foot, "do not wear a melancholy face. I cannot bear to have people pitying me." She hurriedly withdrew from the parlour.

"This atmosphere is toxic and hurtful to children of delicate age such as yours," said Falcone to me once more.

In the early evening of that same day, the familiar visitors gathered at the Morettis'. I was among them when the conversation turned to Gauthier's poem. Sofia openly praised it.

"But do you know what?" she said. "If I were a poet, I would choose different themes. Perhaps this is all nonsensical, but unseemly thoughts occasionally besiege my mind, especially in the wakeful hours of the morning, when the sky is beginning to blush with pink and grey. I would, for instance... You won't laugh at me, will you?"

"No! No!" they all exclaimed in one voice.

"I would portray," she continued, crossing her arms over her breast and casting her eyes aside, "a young maiden in the tranquil embrace of a moonlit night, adorned with garlands of delicate white blossoms, who found herself adrift upon the gentle ripples of a placid river. The celestial orb cast its ethereal glow upon the water's surface, creating a silvered path that beckons her tiny vessel towards an unknown destination."

"I understand, I understand, go on," exclaimed Gauthier in a thoughtful and brooding way.

"Suddenly! Carried by the breeze, a haunting melody reaches her ears. A distant song, delicate yet captivating, guides her towards its source. The melody grows stronger as she approaches the riverbank, where a solitary candle flickers, casting a warm glow upon the shore. It is your business to paint the

picture, Mr. Poet... only I would like to have the candle glow very bright, and that the eyes of the girl should gleam beneath her wreath.

"But what is the girl doing on the river alone in the middle of the night?" inquired Gauthier, tossing back his lank hair and inflating his nostrils.

"Indeed! What is she doing? Listen on... Intrigued, the girl disembarks, her bare feet meeting the cool grass as she moves towards the enchanting glow. The song ceases, leaving the night in suspense, and from the shadows emerges a woman clad in a flowing white gown, as if materialising from the very fabric of the night... This must be well described, how she appears quietly in the moonlight, and how startled the maiden is... Their eyes lock in a silent exchange—a magnetic force pulling them closer together. The air crackles with an unseen energy as they move towards each other, drawn by an invisible thread that transcends the realm of reason. And then, as if guided by fate itself, their lips meet in a tender, ephemeral kiss."

Sofia ceased speaking, and I could feel my cheeks burning so intensely, all I wanted was to be plunged through the floor a hundred leagues underground where no one could see me.

"Is that all?" asked Gauthier.

"That is all," she replied.

"That is simply too obscene to be made the subject of an entire poem," he remarked pompously, "but I will utilise your idea for some lyrical verses."

"In the romantic vein?" asked Alfieri.

"Of course, of course, in the romantic vein—in Byron's style."

"But in my opinion, Keats is better than Byron," remarked the young Conte, carelessly: "he is more decent."

"Keats is a poet of the first class," rejoined Gauthier, "and my friend Suárez, in his Spanish romance, *El Oro del Trovador...*"

"Ah, that's the text with the question-marks turned upside down?" interrupted Sofia.

"Yes. That is the recognised practice among Spaniards. I was about to say that Suárez..."

"Come now! You will begin to quarrel again about classicism and romanticism," Sofia interrupted him again. "Let us rather play..."

"At forfeits?" put in Falcone.

"No, forfeits are tiresome; but at associations."

This game had been invented by Sofia herself. An object was named, and each person tried to associate it with something else, the one who matched the object with the most fitting comparison earned a reward. She approached the window. The sun had just descended; long, crimson clouds lingered high in the sky.

"What do those clouds resemble?" inquired Sofia and, without awaiting response, she continued, "I think that they resemble crimson petals of a rosebud that is yet to bloom. It brings to mind that poem you recited to me not long ago, do you remember, Gauthier?"

All of them, like Iago in Othello, agreed that the clouds indeed brought to mind those petals, and that none among them could propose a better comparison.

I soon departed for home. "I'm in love," my lips whispered against my will... "But so is everyone else around her."

Chapter 8

The days drifted by quietly. Sofia's mood grew more distant, more elusive and incomprehensible with each passing moment. One day, I entered her home, with fresh flowers plucked from our garden, to find her sitting on a cane chair, her head bowed against the unyielding edge of a table. Slowly, she straightened herself, revealing the pale cheeks all bathed in tears.

"Ah! It's you, Emmie," she stifled a sob, but could not hide the pain on her face. "Come closer."

As soon as I approached her, she took my hand in hers, and without warning, squeezed the skin on my arm and began to pinch it with her fingers.

"It hurts..." I said at last.

"Ah! It hurts, she says! And doesn't it hurt me? Doesn't it hurt me?" she exclaimed.

"Oh, this is insufferable!" she cried suddenly, realising that she had inflicted enough pain for a solitary tear to appear in my eye. "What have I done? My poor Emmeline..." Gently, she caressed the skin on my hand she had pinched, then tenderly ran her fingers through my hair, winding the sandy locks around her delicate finger.

"I would like to encase your hair within my locket and wear it close," she declared, tears still brimming in her own eyes. "Perhaps that will comfort you a little... But now you must leave. Goodbye, Emmie," she kissed my cheek before sending me on my way.

When I returned home, I found a bitter state of affairs. A confrontation unfolded between my father and my mother; she reproached him for some transgression, while he, in his usual manner, maintained a frigid and courteous silence—swiftly withdrawing soon thereafter. I could not hear what my mother was complaining about, nor did I show any desire to understand the details. I only recall that, at the conclusion of the scene, she summoned me to her boudoir and voiced great dissatisfaction about my frequent visits to the residence of the young Contessa, whom she deemed, according to her assertions, *une femme aux intentions douteuses*.

I gave her a quick kiss, as I always did when I wanted to conclude a futile conversation, and left for my own room. Sofia's tears had thoroughly unsettled me. I had no idea what to think and was about to cry myself. Despite my feelings and affection for her, I was still a child. Alfieri's name slipped my mind. It was Rossi's foreboding form that cast an ever darker shadow now, as he glared at the Conte like a wolf at a stray sheep.

My thoughts wandered aimlessly, like a cloud adrift on the horizon. Lost in speculations, I sought refuge in secluded spots, developing a particular liking for the ruins of Villa di Domiziano. Perched atop the lofty wall, I would seat myself, turning into an unhappy and lonely child, so much that I felt sorry for myself and my unfortunate circumstance. Oh, how I gloated over my misery, and how strangely delightful those melancholy indulgences impressed upon my heart.

On one such day, while I was sitting on my wall, gazing off into the waters of the lake and listening to the chiming of the church bells, a peculiar sensation came over me. It wasn't quite a breeze, not a shiver either, but an awareness of someone's proximity. Lowering my gaze, I beheld Sofia below me. She was dressed in a graceful summer gown the colour of light coral, with a sage parasol gracing her shoulder. Striding briskly along the road, I eventually came into her view. She saw me, came to a stop, and, lifting the brim of her straw hat, met my eyes with simmering intensity.

"Miss Emmeline, why are you sitting there, on such a height?" she asked astonished, a curious smile playing on her lips. "It's dangerous, don't you know that?" she went on. "Well then, you are always pretending that you love me. Why don't you jump down to me, if you really do love me?"

Before Sofia's words fully resonated in my mind, I had leapt down with an almost involuntary impulse, as if pushed from behind by an unseen hand. The wall on which I sat was about a fathom high, yet the impact of my fall was so forceful that my legs gave beneath me and I hurt myself badly. A fraction of a moment later I felt, without opening my eyes, that Sofia was already by my side.

"My dearest girl," she murmured, as she leaned over me, and a tender concern resonated in her voice. "How could you, my love? How could you obey such a command? I adore you... Now, let me see if you've hurt yourself."

Beside me, her bosom rose and fell with emotion, while her hands gently explored my head and then my leg beneath the folds of my petticoat. Suddenly, her soft, unburdened lips began to shower my entire face with kisses, until they sought and found my own...

Though the kiss lingered for no more than a heartbeat, it unleashed a profound change in my life, for I vowed from this moment on, never to offer my lips for a kiss unless they belonged to another girl.

Sensing, perhaps, from my blissful expression that I had already recovered sufficiently, Sofia swiftly rose to her feet. "Come, get up, you little imp, you foolish child! Why do you lie there in the dust?"

Reluctantly, I complied.

"This little amorous incident shall not repeat itself," Sofia declared in feigned indignation. "Do you hear me? And don't stand there like that. What kind of nonsense is this? Have you hurt yourself? It is a

shame that your pretty dress is tarnished now. Don't look at me like that, Miss Emmeline, I tell you... Why, she understands nothing; she doesn't answer me," Sofia added, as if speaking to herself.

"Come..." she beckoned, extending her hand, as if offering an apology. "Come with me. Let take a stroll down to the lake shore. I have something to share with you."

We walked some distance down the steep hill teeming with verdant plants. The summer sun bathed the gravel path in a golden radiance as we descended towards the glistening waters of Lake Albano. A gentle breeze carried the sweet fragrance of blooming honeysuckle in full bloom, and the rustling leaves of poplar trees lined our path.

Sofia smiled at me, but said nothing. Our fingers entwined as we strolled, and I couldn't have imagined only a moment ago that I would be holding her hand in an intimate way befitting a dream. Nature thrived and burst with colour all around us. Vibrant orchids fringed the trail, and cheerful daisies peered out from behind leafy boughs.

Soon, the gravel gave way to soft grass and reeds as the lake's welcoming shore came into view. Its calm surface undulated gently before us in all directions. We sat down in the grass, and took off our shoes, letting the cold water lap at our feet.

"I know well what it feels like, Emmie," she began hesitantly, as if grappling for the right expression. "The emotions that you experience are not unfamiliar to me. There are moments when I lie in my bed, and in my dreams, it is only you who comes to visit me. There is no one else but the two of us, alone in the garden, free from the constraints of polite society and the weight of imposed expectations." Gently, she placed her parasol on the ground beside her, casting her gaze towards the distant lake where the waters shimmered in the sun's golden glow. "To you, it may seem a melancholy fate, finding yourself captive of this new and perilous affection. However, you are still in the bloom of youth. You possess the liberty to heed the whispers of your heart and steer your life in a direction that avoids the missteps of my own."

"But Sofia, you have the attention of everyone around you," I tried to reason. "Your life is not a misstep; I wish I were as happy and popular as you, so I had the reign to banish all those who trouble you." Then, I sighed, as if my emotions surged forth all at once. "I only wish... I only wish to be with you, Sofia. Why can't we be together?"

"I was once like you..." She drew closer, wrapping one arm gently around my shoulders. "Not so long ago, I attended a convent within the walls of the Sisters of Santa Croce. In our assembly, there was a girl whose beauty possessed the radiance of an ethereal dawn. Unwittingly, she became the sole object of my waking thoughts, and her smile set my soul aflame in a way I knew not how to understand. Every time she entered my view, it felt as though my heart was breaking in two, such was her beauty. But it was the cruel fate that, in my secret adoration, she appeared indifferent to my presence. Her gaze, like that of a distant star, refused to acknowledge my humble orbit."

Her words trailed off, and for a long moment, silence prevailed. I wondered if she hesitated to confide more of her youthful affair, but just as I considered speaking out and asking for the girl's name, she resumed her confession.

"Weeks passed in this confused torment, marked by the silent longing of my heart, and I was mortified my infatuation would soon show upon my face for all to see. One morning, as we strolled the flowering garden grounds, my secret could hold no more. With trembling breath, I confessed my fondness for her, certain I had ruined our bond forever with my impossible affection. To my surprise, gentle pity softened her face, and tender words of compassion met my worried gaze. She took my hands in hers and her lips pressed slowly to mine in a kiss, igniting a flame neither nun nor priest could dampen evermore. Since that blessed hour, I walked with new sight and a joy in my soul, knowing that I wasn't alone in my secret adoration of the female companionship."

"Have you ever met her afterwards?" I dared to ask after she fell into a sombre mood.

I haven't, and I dare not even imagine what such a meeting could bring between us. The life has moved on, dear Emmie, and it's better for everyone not to dwell on what used to be."

I couldn't conceal recognising the familiar, disheartening undertone in her voice. "But why, Sofia? Why not pursue what brings you happiness?" I felt an almost irresistible urge to stamp my foot in childish frustration.

"You must understand, Emmie," her eyes met mine in a resigned gaze, "that this is not a path deemed suitable for young ladies. Our prescribed role is to enter matrimony when the time comes, and those beastly men who circle and linger around my rooms anticipate but one outcome. My choice in this matter is limited, as my family expects me to fulfil this duty," her voice softened. "Many a night, I have cried in my bed, wishing my affliction would come to pass, but to no avail. And when you walked into my life, the memories of convent days surged forth, and I found myself once again falling into this precious, but shameful, sentiment," Sofia explained, taking the hem of my dress in her hand and shaking her head. "Here, let me try to clean this for you."

A sad smile danced in her eyes as she took her kerchief and, after soaking it in the lake waters, attempted to clean the grass stains from the fabric which marked the spot of my recent fall.

"That's slightly better now. Go home, Emmie, your mother will be cross with you when she sees the state you are in," she added. "And don't dare to follow me again. This silly infatuation has to end right now, or we shall bring a great shame to our families..."

Soon after ending her revelation, she walked briskly away, while I remained down by the lakeside. My legs would not support me, my summer dress was dirty and tattered, my back ached, and my head was reeling. Yet, the sensation of blissful happiness which I then experienced has never since been repeated in my life. It lingered like a bittersweet ache in every limb, and every thought, erupting in excited jumps and joyful outbursts.

In truth, I was still a child, yet I was overwhelmed with happiness and pride all that day, and the lingering impression of Sofia's kisses and the honesty of her confession etched in my memory for a

lifetime. But still, I could not understand why she deemed our affection an infatuation and spoke of shame. It was no infatuation, for I loved her with all my heart, and I knew deep inside that there could be no shame about love such as ours.

I clung to this unforeseen happiness so dearly that a dread crept in, frightening me from seeking her, the one who was the cause of those newfound sensations. It seemed to me that Fate had bestowed upon me all I could ask, and that now I must draw a deep breath for the final time and succumb to an imminent death.

The next day, as I headed to Sofia's garden, an overwhelming turmoil gripped me. I tried to hide it behind a facade of demure composure suitable for a young lady holding a secret, but all was in vain. When I arrived, Sofia greeted me with an unassuming simplicity and restrained emotion, merely presenting her cheek to be kissed and asking had I any bruises.

My carefully crafted air of discretion and mysterious ambiguity quickly faded, along with my unease and worry. Though I had not expected anything in particular, Sofia's composed demeanour struck me like a splash of cold water, and shattered my illusions. It dawned on me that in her eyes, I wasn't only a child, but being a girl much like herself, it was improper for us to be intimate in the company of others. This realisation weighed heavily on my heart. As Sofia paced the room, her fleeting smiles barely reached me, and her thoughts seemed far away. Should I hint to what happened yesterday, I thought? Should I ask her why she left in such haste, to find out if I was the one to blame? But overwhelmed with despair, I merely bowed my head and sat down in a corner.

That was when Rossi entered. His very presence repulsed me.

"I've yet to secure a docile steed for you," he commenced in a gruff tone. "Lorenzo vouches for one, but I remain unconvinced. I am apprehensive."

"What prompts this fear, allow me to inquire?" asked Sofia.

"Fear, she asks! Why, my dear, you lack equestrian prowess. Heaven forbid any mishap should occur! And where did you get such a fanciful notion? Have you not a more congenial diversion to occupy yourself with than to torment the poor creature?"

"Well, that's my concern, M'sieu. In that case, I shall consult Alfieri."

"You don't say!" retorted Rossi. "Is it with Alfieri that you wish to ride?"

"With him or another—what difference does it matter to you? Just not with you."

"Not with me," declared Rossi. "As you wish, Madam. What does it matter? I'll get you the horse."

"But ensure it's not a cow-like beast. I forewarn you, I intend to gallop."

"Gallop, if you please... But are you planning to ride with Alfieri?" Rossi inquired.

"And, pray tell, why should I not ride with him, dear cavalryman? Come, settle down. I'll take you along, too. You know that for me, Alfieri is now... ugh!" She shook her head.

"You say that only to console me," grumbled Rossi.

Sofia narrowed her eyes. "Does that console you?" she said at last, seemingly unable to find a more fitting response. "And would you care to accompany us, Miss Emmeline?"

"I'm not confident of riding... in a large company," I muttered, avoiding eye contact.

"Oh, so you prefer a *tête-à-tête* Well, to each their own liking," she sighed. "But go on, Rossi, make an effort. I want the horse for tomorrow."

"Yes, but where am I to find the money?" interjected the old Contessa.

Sofia scowled.

"I'm not asking any from you. Rossi will trust me."

"He will, he will," grumbled the old Contessa.

Rossi bowed and took his leave, and I hesitantly followed suit. Sofia made no effort to stop me.

Early on the following morning, as soon as I could gain permission from my parents, I ventured into the gardens of Villa Barberini. "I shall take a stroll and dispel my sorrow," I murmured to myself. The day unfolded in beauty, radiant yet not oppressively warm. A careless, exhilarating breeze rustled the treetops, playing with a gentle restraint, ceaselessly in motion yet disturbing nothing.

Amidst the briars, hedges, copses, and flowerbeds, I wandered for a long time in my solitude. Happiness eluded me. I had departed home with the singular aspiration of surrendering myself to melancholy, but the forces of youth, the pleasant weather, the fragrant air, the diversion of ambling amongst the nature, and the sheer joy of resting in protective seclusion upon the lush grass—all these factors exerted their influence on me. The reflection of those unforgettable words, those lavish kisses, propelled itself into my soul anew. It comforted me to think that Sofia could not, despite everything, fail to acknowledge my resolve, my heroism...

I could see clearly now, and for the first time, that our love could never be. 'Tis was love fated for the gallows—condemned to the funeral pyre until its cinders turned to ash. On the flip side, the empty declarations of others merely echoed their intentions, while I had acted upon mine! And what else am I capable of doing for her? My imagination stirred within my soul. I began to fantasise about scenarios of how I might rescue her from the clutches of enemies—how, all bathed in blood of the battle, I would liberate her from captivity. How, like a wounded fawn, I would lay down my life at her feet. I recalled a painting that adorned my father's drawing-room, depicting Perseus liberating Andromeda—and, consumed by this reverie, I imagined myself as her chivalrous saviour.

Other times I daydreamed of being held a prisoner, ensnared by the malevolent presence of demonic dragons and an evil wizard. Chained within the confines of a dungeon, my fate awaiting its destiny until she emerged as a terrifying force of liberation and justice, rescuing me from the tall tower where I languished in captivity.

The ensuing battle of mythical proportions resembled nothing less than a clash between the forces of darkness and the unyielding spirit of virtue. With each swing of her blade, she would slay the malevolent entities, transcending mortal constraint to become a Goddess of vengeance and annihilation. And there, amidst the death and carnage, we'd stand triumphant, the echoes of our victory resonating through the air. Together, we would gallop into the distance, leaving only a trail of dust in our wake.

Meanwhile, the hour when I was expected to return home for lunch was approaching. I descended into the valley along the lakeshore, where a narrow sandy path meandered towards the town. Strolling along this path, I was roused by the dull beat of horses' hooves echoing behind me.

Turning instinctively, I came to a standstill. Removing my round straw hat, I discovered the approaching figures of Alfieri and Sofia riding side by side. The Conte was engaged in conversation, inclining his entire form towards her, his hand resting upon the neck of her horse and smiling. Sofia listened to his words in silence, her eyes cast downward in displeasure, lips tightly compressed. At first, only the two of them captured my attention.

It was not until moments later that Rossi emerged from a bend in the valley, attired in a cavalryman's uniform and mounted upon a lathered, raven horse. The spirited steed tossed his head, snorted and pranced, while his rider simultaneously reined in and spurred him on.

I stepped aside as Alfieri gathered his reins and distanced himself from Sofia. She slowly raised her eyes to meet his, and then suddenly both surged forth at a gallop. Rossi thundered headlong after them, his sword clanking against his thigh.

He's as red as a crab, I thought, and she... why is she so pale? She's been riding all morning, and yet her cheeks are as pallid as a lily in bloom.

Quickening my pace, I reached home just before lunch time. My father, freshly dressed, groomed, and rested, sat beside my mother's armchair, reading aloud from the feuilleton of the *Journal des Débats* in his even, sonorous voice. However, my mother was hardly paying any attention to him, and when she noticed me, she inquired where I had been all day. In her customary fashion, she mentioned how she disliked me prowling around the Morettis and constantly frolicking about with that tawdry little Contessa.

"But I have been walking alone," I protested, stealing a glance at my father, who, for some unspoken reason, remained silent.

Chapter 9

Over the course of the next five or six days, I scarcely glimpsed Sofia. She let everyone know that she was unwell, a notice that failed to avert the customary visitors from presenting themselves at the

Moretti wing, eager to "take their turn in attendance," as they put it. All followed the same routine, except for Gauthier, who immediately became disheartened as soon as he was denied the opportunity to lavish his raptures.

Rossi occupied a corner with a morose air and dejected stance, all buttoned up and red in the face. A sinister smile persistently adorned Conte Alfieri's delicate mouth. Having fallen out of favour with Sofia, he endured the old Contessa's reproaches with particular unease. One day, he even took her to the Governor-General's in a hired carriage, however, the trip proved fruitless and even resulted in an unpleasant incident for Alfieri. It transpired that he was reminded of some altercation with a certain Léandre officer, and was obliged to claim, in self-defence, that the incident occurred in the throws of youthful inexperience and misguided jest.

Doctor Falcone visited twice a day but did not linger. After his last insinuation about me and Sofia, I felt a measure of unease in his presence, yet at the same time, I felt a genuine fondness for him. One day, he took me by the hand for a stroll in the Barberini gardens, and it was there, beneath the canopy of stone pines that, very courteously and kindly, he taught me the names and properties of various plants and flowers.

Then, out of the blue, he exclaimed—without apparent rhyme or reason, as the saying goes—while striking his forehead, "And I, like a foolish schoolboy, thought she was a *flirteuse*! Evidently, her heart is suffused with the subtlety of Sapphic habitude."

"What do you mean by that?" I asked, perplexed by unfamiliar words.

"Some people find solace in self-sacrifice, I regret to say. You are too young to understand the implications of this unfortunate malady. But, for the love of God, child, stay away from the Contessa," Falcone cautioned abruptly.

Sofia kept her distance from me. My mere presence—I couldn't help but sense it—left a troubled impression on her. She avoided me at every turn, turned away from me every time I cast my eyes on her. But what hurt me the most was the involuntary nature of her actions. This wasn't something that she wanted to do, and that's what broke my heart! Yet, there was nothing anyone could do to help it, and I tried to stay out of her view, only observing mournfully over her from a distance, and not always successfully.

As before, a concealed conflict was taking place within her. Her face had become absorbed—she seemed an entirely different person. The change struck me particularly on a warm, tranquil evening. I was seated on a low bench beneath the sprawling elder-bush, a favoured nook from which I could glimpse Sofia's bedroom window.

There I sat, with a tiny bird fussily rummaging overhead in the darkened foliage. A large cat, stretching languidly, had stolen into the garden, and the buzzing beetles droned heavily in the air. The atmosphere was still transparent, though no longer bathed in midday sunlight. I sat there with my eyes fixed on the window, waiting to see if it would open.

After a while, it did open, and Sofia appeared within its frame. Not only was she clad in a white gown, but her face, shoulders, and hands exuded a pallor bordering on pure whiteness. She remained motionless, and for a long time, stared straight ahead from beneath furrowed brows. I did not recognise that look on her face. Clasping her hands very tightly, she raised them to her lips, and then to her forehead. Suddenly, unlocking her fingers, she pushed her hair away from her ears, shook it back, and, with a certain decisiveness, threw her head downward, slamming the window shut.

Two days later, we met by chance in the park. I attempted to sidestep, but she called to me.

"Give me your hand, Emmie," she beckoned to me, with her old affection. "It's been a long time since you and I spoke alone."

I looked at her; her eyes beamed a soft radiance, and her face bore a smile, as if veiled by a mist.

"Are you still unwell?" I inquired.

"No, things are slightly better now," she replied, plucking a small red rose. "I am a little fatigued, but that too shall pass."

"And will you be again the same as you used to be?" I asked, rather impolitely.

Sofia lifted the rose to her face, and it appeared as if the brilliance of the petals cast a reflection upon her cheeks.

"Have I changed that much?" she asked me.

"Yes, you have changed," I replied in a sullen tone.

"I was cold toward you, darling, I admit that much," Sofia began, "but you must forgive me... I could not act otherwise... Come, what's the use of dwelling on that?"

"You don't want me to love you! I know you don't," I exclaimed bitterly, with sudden capriciousness.

"Yes, love me, but not as before. It's not right... It's not right for two girls to love each other the way we do, do you understand?"

"How, then?"

"Let us be friends, dear Emmie, that is how," Sofia offered me to smell the rose she held in her hand.

"Listen... I am much older than you, you know... I might even be your aunt, truly... Well, if not your aunt, then your elder sister. While you..."

"I am a child to you!" I stopped her abruptly with first tears clouding my eyes.

"Well, yes, you're only twelve, Emmie. You are a child, but a dear, beautiful, beloved child, of whom I am very fond. Do you know what? I hereby appoint you to the post of my confidant from this day forth, and you must not forget that confidants should never be separated from their queen. Here is a token of your newfound dignity," she declared, placing the red rose in the buttonhole of my pinafore. "A symbol of our favour towards you."

"I have received many favours from you in the past," I murmured sulkily.

"Ah!" Sofia exclaimed, casting a sidelong glance at me. "What a memory you have! But I don't like these little tears in your eyes, my love," and leaning towards me, she bestowed upon my lips a pure, blissful kiss.

I remained motionless as I stared at her, but she turned away and strolled towards her garden, saying, "Follow me, my confidant, before somebody notices our transgression."

I followed her in a state of bewilderment. Is it possible, I pondered, that this gentle, sensible young girl is the same Sofia I used to know? Even her very walk struck me as more tranquil, her entire figure more majestic, more graceful...

And, my God! With what fresh intensity did love flare up within me!

Chapter 10

After dinner, the visitors reconvened in the wing, and the young Contessa joined them. The entire company was assembled, in full attendance, reminiscent of that first evening etched forever in my memory. Even Orlov had managed to drag himself there, and Gauthier, arriving earlier than the rest, brought with him some new verses.

The game of forfeits recommenced, yet this time devoid of the peculiar eccentricities, free of pranks and uproar, and the boisterous gypsy spirit had entirely dissipated. Sofia bestowed a new atmosphere on our gathering. I sat proudly by her side, as her personal confidant should. Among other proposals, she suggested that whoever drew the forfeit should narrate their dream, but this proved to be a tiresome endeavour. The dreams that were subsequently chronicled were either uninteresting, unnatural, or plainly fabricated.

Following this disappointment, Gauthier tortured us with his freshly published novel. Sepulchres, angels with harps, burning lights, and distant wails comprised the narrative. Sofia did not permit him to finish.

"If we are discussing imagination," she remarked, "then let each one share something entirely made up." Rossi was obliged to speak first.

The young cavalryman grew flustered. "I cannot invent anything!" he exclaimed.

"What nonsense!" Sofia interjected. "Come, try to imagine, for instance, that you are married and then tell us how you would pass the time with your beloved wife. Would you confine her under lock and key within your chambers?"

"I would."

"And would you remain with her yourself?"

"I most certainly would."

"Very well. Now, what if she grew bored with your arrangements, and set out to betray you with another?"

"I would kill her!"

"Just so. Now, supposing I were your dear, unfortunate wife, what would you do then?"

Rossi remained silent for a moment. "I would kill myself!"

Sofia burst into laughter. "I see there's not much to be gleaned from you."

The second forfeit befell Sofia. She raised her eyes to the ceiling and pondered.

"Listen," she began at last, "this is what I have conceived... Envision for yourselves a splendid palace, a summer night, and an extraordinary ball. The ball is hosted by the young Queen. Everything there is made of gold, marble, jewels, silk, diamonds, flowers of every kind, and the smoke of incense—all the whims of luxury."

"Do you have an affinity for luxury?" Falcone interjected.

"Luxury is beautiful," she replied. "I love everything that is beautiful."

"More than what is deemed appropriate?" he queried.

"That is a difficult question. Somehow, I don't understand your notion of proper. Don't bother me again. So, there is a magnificent ball. Many guests attend—all young, remarkably handsome, courageous, and passionately in love with the Queen."

"Are there no women among the guests?" Alfieri inquired.

"Yes... yes, of course there are."

"Equally handsome?"

"Charming. But the men are all enamoured with the Queen. She is tall and slender; she adorns a small gold coronet on her black hair."

I looked at Sofia, and in that moment, she appeared so high above us, her white forehead and impassive eyebrows exuding such clear intelligence and gracefulness, that I whispered to myself, you are the Queen herself!

"All crowd around her," continued Sofia, "all lavish the most flattering speeches upon her."

"And does she relish this flattery?" questioned Falcone.

"How intolerable! He is continually interrupting... Who does not appreciate flattery?"

"One final question," remarked Alfieri. "Does the Queen have a husband?"

"I haven't thought about that. No, why should she have a husband?"

"Of course," agreed Alfieri. "Why should she have a husband? Perhaps she has a female companion."

"Silence!" exclaimed, Rossi in English, for he spoke French poorly.

"*Merci,*" expressed Sofia to him. "So then, the Queen listens to those speeches, listens to the music, but does not cast a glance at a single one of her guests. Six windows are thrown open from bottom to top, from ceiling to floor, and behind them, in the distance, lies the darkened sky adorned with the magnitude of stars and the shadowy garden enveloping huge trees. The Queen gazes into the garden. There, amidst the trees, a fountain stands—gleaming white in the gloom, beckoning, as if guiding the Faith itself. The Queen hears the soft plashing of its waters amidst the conversation and the music. She gazes and contemplates, *'All of you gentlemen are noble, clever, wealthy; you are all ready to die at my feet while I rule over you... But yonder, by the side of the fountain, beside that plashing water, someone stands small, and waits for me—the one whom I love—the one who rules over my heart. This person adorns themselves in no opulent attire, no precious jewels; their identity eludes recognition. Yet, someone awaits my arrival, firmly believing that I shall appear—and indeed, I shall, for no force in existence can impede my desire to lose myself and join them beneath in the shifting shadows of the park, amid the whispering leaves, beneath the gentle murmur of the fountain...'*"

Sofia concluded her narrative.

"Is that an invention?" slyly asked Alfieri.

Sofia did not even glance at him.

"But what should we do, gentlemen," Falcone suddenly interjected, "if we were among the guests, and to our astonishment found out that this individual waiting for the Queen was a maiden herself?"

An uproar of laughter echoed through the room.

"Wait, wait," interposed Sofia. "I myself will tell you what each one of you would do. You, Rossi, would imprison her in a high tower; you, Gauthier, would write an epigram about her... But no—you do not know how to write epigrams. You would compose a long tragic poem about her, after the style of Mallarmé, and would publish your drivel in the Telegraph. You, Orlov, would borrow money from him... no, you would lend him money on interest. And you, doctor..." She paused. "I really do not know anything about you or what you would do."

"In my role as Court-physician," replied Falcone, "I would venture to suggest, Your Majesty, that hosting grand balls when one's heart is not inclined towards festivity may not be the wisest choice. It is essential to uphold the dignified customs befitting your royal stature."

"I fear, Doctor Falcone, that your sagacious counsel might swiftly cost you your esteemed position. And what of you, Conte?"

"And what would I do?" echoed Alfieri, wearing a wicked smile.

"You might be tempted to present her with poisoned candy-apples."

A subtle twitch danced upon Alfieri's features, assuming for a moment a bemused expression, only to dissolve into a hearty laugh.

"And as for you, Miss Emmeline..." Sofia continued, "But enough of this diversion. Let us engage in a different game."

"Miss Emmeline, in her capacity of consort to the Queen, would hide beneath the Queen's petticoat for the lack of anything to say," remarked Alfieri viciously.

An intense blush consumed my cheeks, and my small fists clenched with indignation, but Sofia readily laid a comforting hand on my shoulder and, rising, addressed Alfieri in a slightly tremulous voice, "I have never given Your Radiance the right to be insolent to my Royal confidant, and therefore I beg that you will withdraw after offering your sincerest apology to Miss Emmeline," and then she pointed him to the door.

"Have mercy, Contessa," mumbled Alfieri, turning pale all over.

"Indeed, the Contessa is correct," declared Rossi, rising in support.

"By God! I never in the least anticipated this," Alfieri continued. "I believe my words held no ill intent... I had no desire to offend young Miss Emmeline... Forgive me!"

Sofia regarded him with a frosty gaze and offered a cold smile. "Remain, if you wish," she said, with a careless wave of her hand. "Miss Emmeline and I have taken offence without cause. If jesting brings you amusement... I wish you well."

"Forgive me," Alfieri repeated once more, and as I reflected on Sofia's commanding presence, I couldn't help but think that a true queen couldn't have dismissed a disrespectful man from the room with more grace and authority.

The game of forfeits quickly lost its charm after this little scene. A sense of unease settled among us, not so much as a result of the scene itself as from another, not entirely defined, but unmistakable realisation. No one dared allude to it, yet the unspoken weight lingered within each, a clear understanding that preoccupied our thoughts. Gauthier eventually succumbed, reciting to us his poems, and Alfieri showered praise upon them with exaggerated ardour.

"He is striving hard to appear amiable now," Falcone whispered to me.

Our company soon dispersed. Sofia, once animated, became contemplative, and news arrived that the old Contessa was plagued by a headache. Orlov, too, lamented his rheumatism.

Sleep eluded me long into the night. Sofia's actions and the defiant way she stood to protect me continued to linger in my mind for a long time. Could it carry a subtle hint, I pondered. And at whom was she hinting? If indeed there exists someone to hint about... what must I decide to do?

"No, no, it cannot be," I whispered as if taken by a fever, turning over from one burning cheek to the other. Yet, the expression on Sofia's face during her story replayed in my thoughts. I recalled Falcone's

outburst in the Barberini gardens, the abrupt shifts in her treatment towards me—and found myself entangled in a web of conjectures.

Who is she? These three words materialised before me in the darkness like an ominous cloud hanging over me. Its weight pressed heavy on my chest, suffocating me, and I waited every moment for it to burst.

Since we arrived in Castel Gandolfo, I had become accustomed to many things. I felt as if I had grown up in a matter of weeks amidst the Moretti's chaos, their disorderliness, tallow candle-ends, broken utensils, gloomy Salvatore, the shabby maids, and the eccentricities and manners of the old Contessa herself. All that crazy and Bohemian life no longer surprised me... But to that which I now dimly felt in Sofia, I could not get used...

"Une imposteure," my mother had one day said concerning her. An imposter—she, my idol, my divinity, my... love! The label seared my soul. I sought refuge in my pillow, raging inwardly. At the same time, I found myself contemplating what I would not have agreed to, what I would not have sacrificed, if only I might be that fortunate mortal by the fountain, waiting for her Queen!

My heart pounded and surged within me. A garden... a fountain, I thought. Yes, I shall go into the garden.

Swiftly dressing myself in the gloom of my bedroom, I slipped out of the house in the dead of night. Past midnight, the shroud of darkness enveloped me, and only trees whispered faintly. A quiet chill was descending from the sky, carrying the fragrance of jasmine flowers from the nearby garden. I made the round of all the pathways; the faint echo of my footsteps both unsettled and emboldened me. I halted, waiting and listening to hear how my heart was beating quickly and violently.

At last, I approached the fence and leaned against a slender post. Suddenly—or perhaps it was only my imagination—a woman's silhouette flitted past a few paces away... I strained my eyes intently on the shadows in the night, holding my breath. What exactly did I hear? Footsteps, or the beating of my heart once more?

"Who is there?" I stammered in hushed tones. Was it a suppressed laugh, a rustling in the leaves, or a sigh near my ear? I trembled... I was terrified.

"Who is there?" I repeated, in an even softer voice.

A momentary flutter of the breeze, a fiery streak across the sky as a star descended. Is it Sofia? I tried to ask, but the sound died on my trembling lips. Suddenly, a profound stillness enveloped everything, as is common in the heart of the night. Even the crickets ceased their shrill song in the trees; only a window rattled somewhere.

I stood there, in solitude, for I don't know how long, then returned to my bedroom, to my cold bed. A peculiar restlessness overcame me, as if I had attended a clandestine tryst by the moonlight, only to find myself alone, as if passing by someone else's happiness.

Chapter 11

The following day came, but I caught only a fleeting glimpse of Sofia, as she departed somewhere in the company of the old Contessa, ensconced within a hired carriage. Falcone, in his hurried departure, scarcely cared to bestow a greeting my way. On the other hand, the youthful Conte Alfieri, wearing a sly grin, entered into a childish conversation with me, attempting to make me appear as if I were a mere infant. Among all the visitors to the estate, he alone managed to gain an entrance to our house, endearing himself to my mother. My father, however, held no liking for him, though he maintained a courteous presence while treating him politely to the point of insult.

"Ah, Mademoiselle *confidente*," began Alfieri, "I am delighted to meet you this fine morning. Pray tell, what occupies your charming Queen in my absence?"

His face, so fresh and handsome, proved repulsive to me in that moment, as he regarded me with such a scornful gaze, that I made him no answer whatsoever.

"Persisting in bad humour, are we?" he continued. "There is no occasion for it, dear child. It was not I, you see, who bestowed upon you the title of *confidante*, as adorable and conceited as such a title may appear. Allow me, perchance, to observe to you, that you are executing your duties rather poorly."

"And how so?"

"*Confidantes* ought to be inseparable from their sovereigns. They should be privy to their every action—even to stand vigilant over them," he added, lowering his voice, "day and night."

"What do you mean by that?"

"What do I mean? I believe I have articulated myself quite plainly. *Day—and—night*. It does not matter so much about the day. During the day, it is light and there are people mingling about. But by night—that is precisely the time when catastrophe may strike. Someone might snatch your beloved Queen from you, and then where would you be without her love and affection? I advise you to forgo sleep at night and to watch—watch with all your might. Remember her words—it is within a garden, by night, near the fountain—that is where your vigilant guard must be unwavering. You will thank me for this counsel."

Alfieri chuckled dismissively and turned away from me, likely attaching no particular importance to words spoken to a mere child. Renowned for his skill in sarcasm and his clever deceptions at masquerades, where his innate inclination towards lying and deceiving served him well, he was reputed to be a master of such wit. His intention had been no more than to tease me, yet each of his words seeped like venom into my veins. The fury and bitterness of it all flew to my head.

"Ah! So that's it!" I murmured to myself. "Very well! It was not without reason that I felt drawn to the garden! This shall not stand!" I declared, though I was quite uncertain about precisely what I was resolved to prevent. Could he have inadvertently revealed a secret? He was insolent enough for such indiscretion. Regardless of whether Alfieri himself ventured into the garden or someone else, the person I catch in the act of transgression will pay a heavy price. I would demonstrate to the entire world, and to her, that traitress, that I possessed the means of exacting my vengeance!

Silently, I sneaked into my father's study, snatching from his writing-desk a recently purchased Persian dagger. Assessing the sharpness of the blade, I furrowed my brows and tucked it into my pinafore with a cool and deliberate resolve as though it was nothing remarkable for me, a girl of twelve, and this was not the first occasion either.

My heart swelled with bitterness, growing cold and unyielding within me. I did not unfurl my brows until nightfall, and did not relax my lips as I paced back and forth while clutching the knife, which had grown warm within the folds of my dress. Anticipating some impending calamity, these new and unprecedented emotions consumed me, providing a strange comfort that diverted my thoughts away from Sofia herself.

My father was absent from home that day, and my mother, who had been in a prolonged state of irritable discontent, observed my sombre expression during supper.

"What are you sulking about, like a cat caught in the rain?" she inquired. I merely offered a compliant smile, as expected of an obedient schoolgirl, while secretly thinking to myself, "If only they knew!"

As the clock chimed ten, I ascended to my bedroom, but refrained from the customary undressing. It was the stroke of midnight that I awaited, and at last, the hour arrived! "'Tis time!" I hissed through clenched teeth, assuming the manner of a marauder stealthing for an ambush. Lacing up my Balmorals, I sneaked into the garden.

Conceiving myself that I was a secret agent, entrusted with the mission of safeguarding my Queen, I had predetermined the location where I would stand on guard. At the garden's far edge, where the fence marked our estate from the Morettis' met the shared wall, stood a solitary spruce-tree. Positioned beneath its low, dense branches, I could see well, as far as the nocturnal twilight permitted, everything that transpired around me. There also meandered a path which always seemed mysterious to me. Like a serpent, it sneaked beneath the fence, which at that point bore traces of scrambling feet, leading to an arbour of dense acacias. Reaching the spruce-tree, I leaned against its trunk and began my clandestine watch.

The night mirrored tranquillity, in stark contrast to the previous evening. The sky bore fewer storm-clouds, rendering the outlines of the foliage and even the tall flowers more distinctly visible. The initial moments of anticipation were tedious, bordering on the apprehensive. I had resolved upon every eventuality, deliberating long and hard on the appropriate course of action. Should I resoundingly declare, "Halt! Who goes there? Confess—or die!" or simply wield my dagger with force and resolution against my adversary, stabbing the creature in its thieving heart?

Every sound, every murmur and rustle, oppressed my senses with hidden meanings and intentional ploys against my vigilance. I readied myself, leaning forward in anticipation. Yet, as half an hour, then a full hour, elapsed, my blood settled and turned cold. The realisation that my efforts were in vain, that I appeared somewhat absurd even to myself, that Alfieri had indulged in mockery at my expense, sneaked its way into my consciousness.

Abandoning my covert position, I ambled forlornly along the entire garden. As if by design, not a single sound echoed in the stillness. All was calm, even our dog lay asleep, curled into a ball by the gate. Climbing atop the ruin of the hothouse, I beheld before me the distant shadows of Villa Barberini and its gardens. In disconsolate solitude, I recalled my meeting with Sofia there amidst the blooming flowers, and became immersed in a reverie.

Suddenly, I started, convinced I heard the creak of an opening door, followed by the faint crackling of a broken twig. Descending from the ruin in two swift bounds, I stood frozen on the spot. Swift, delicate, yet cautious footsteps were plainly audible in the garden. They were approaching me!

"Here he is... At last, here he comes!" raced through my heart. Jerking the Persian dagger from my pinafore and unsheathing it furiously, red sparks whirled before my eyes, and my hair stood on end with fright and indignation. The steps drew nearer, coming straight toward me—I bent forward, advancing to meet them...

A figure emerged from the gloom...

I could discern that it was Rossi, even cloaked in darkness as he was, with the hat pulled low over his face, and head bowed to evade detection. He passed by without acknowledging my presence, after I had contracted and shrunk to such an extent that I might have been level with the ground. The jealous Othello, who was primed for murder and ready to kill, had, in an instant, transformed into a frightened schoolgirl...

I was so terrified by his unexpected visitation that I did not even take note, at first, in what direction he was going and where he had disappeared. I merely straightened up, brushed my soiled dress with my hands, and pondered, "Why would Rossi wander in the garden at midnight?"

In my disquiet, I had dropped my dagger in the grass, yet I made no attempt to recover it. I was overwhelmed by a sense of shame that sobered me instantly. However, on my way home, I approached my little bench beneath the elder-bush and cast a glance at Sofia's bedroom window. The small, somewhat curved panes faintly gleamed blue in the dim light falling from the starry sky.

Suddenly, their colour began to shift... Behind them—I saw it! I saw it clearly!—a whitish shade descended, reaching the sill and remaining motionless.

"What does this signify?" I said to myself aloud, almost unconsciously, when I found myself again in my own room. "Was it a dream, an accident, or a premonition?" The conjectures that sprang forth were so wild and peculiar that I dared not entertain them.

Morning greeted me with a headache. The agitation of the previous night had vanished like a dumb and fantastical dream. Instead, it had given way to a perplexing weight and a certain, yet unfamiliar sadness, as though something within me had died.

"Why do you resemble a tortoise navigating life with only a fraction of its brainpower?" asked Falcone, who happened to encounter me on his morning stroll. I merely walked past him without even wishing him good-morning.

During breakfast, I cast covert glances from my father to my mother. He remained composed, as was his custom, while she, in her usual fashion, harboured a concealed irritation. I waited to see whether my father would acknowledge me in any way, as he sometimes did, or even only offer to stroke my hair as one would pet some sort of kitten. But he did none of these things. At that moment, I disliked them both greatly, and never wanted to become like them.

Shall I reveal all to Sofia, I thought to myself? It matters little now—everything is over between us.

Approaching her courtyard, I not only did not tell her anything, but I was also denied the opportunity to talk with her as I had intended. The old Contessa's nephew, a ten-year-old schoolboy, had freshly arrived from Florence to pass his vacation with her.

Sofia promptly entrusted her cousin to my care. "Here, my dear Emmie," she declared, "is a friend for you. His name is Matteo. Do be fond of him. He's still a lively little fellow, but he possesses a good heart. Show him the Barberini gardens, walk with him down to the lake shore and look after him, will you not? You, too, are such a good girl!"

Affectionately, she placed both hands on my shoulders, reducing me to utter bewilderment. The arrival of this boy turned me into a child once again. I gazed silently at him, while he reciprocated my silence with an unwavering stare.

Sofia erupted into laughter, urging us towards each other. "Come, embrace, children!"

And so we embraced.

"If you wish, I can take you to the garden," I offered to the boy.

"Certainly, Miss," he replied in a sweet, boyish tone. Sofia indulged in another fit of laughter, and I managed to observe the charming flush on her face. Matteo and I ventured into the garden together. Before us stood an aged swing. Seating him on the slender board, I began to swing him. He remained motionless and stiff like a little soldier in his new school uniform, adorned with a broad white collar, while gripping the ropes tightly.

"You might want to unbutton your collar," I suggested.

"Never mind, Miss, we are accustomed to it, Miss," he responded, clearing his throat.

He bore a resemblance to his cousin—his eyes, especially, mirrored her features. It was pleasant for me to be of service to him, yet at the same time, an underlying aching pain quietly gnawed at my heart. "Now I truly am a child," I mused, "but last night..."

I remembered the spot where I had dropped my dagger and retrieved it. Matteo requested to borrow it, then plucked a stalk of wild reed, fashioning a whistle from it to pipe a tune. I joined in the melody too, only wasn't as good at it as Matteo.

But, come afternoon, how did I weep in Sofia's hands when, having found me in a corner of the garden, she asked with incredulity and dismay what made me so heartbroken. I sobbed so hard I could scarcely catch my breath, and my tears flowed down my cheeks with such intense ferocity that it frightened her to look at me.

"What is the matter with you, my little love? What is the matter?" she repeated, and as I offered no response, she took it upon herself to kiss my wet, tear-stained lips. However, I turned away, whispering through my sobs, "I know everything. Why have you played with my feelings? Why did you want my love?"

"Am I entirely at fault for this, Emmie?" asked Sofia despondently. "Am I very much to blame when I had no say in the matter myself?" she spoke, clenching her hands. "If only you knew how much have I missed being alone with you, and only you, my love, and how much it pains me to see you in this state. But it's beyond my control, like the twinkling stars in the skies above. And yes, I played a role in this absurd theatre unfolding therein, but I never toyed with your emotions, and I am not doing so now... I love you, my dear Emmie! I always have, since the very first day my eyes fell upon you. You are unaware of the reasons and the depth of it... But I do love you more than the life itself, and I'm not afraid to shout it from the bell tower, even if it casts a shadow upon my reputation or puts me to shame before everyone who knows me," her tearful gaze found solace on the ground at her feet. "Will you tell me now what is on your mind?"

But what words could I offer her? She stood before me, her gaze brimming with devotion, and in that very moment, I belonged to her wholly, from head to foot, captivated by the tenderness of those eyes. Her hands drew me closer, and I threw myself at her with unmatched ferocity, and held her so tightly, I never held anyone before or since in my life.

A quarter of an hour later, I was running about in a game of tag with Matteo and Sofia. I was not weeping any longer. The tears of sorrow ceased, replaced by tears of joy amidst the laughter and exhilarating happiness. The crimson ribbon that once graced Sofia's hair now proudly danced, adorning mine, as I shouted with triumphant glee every time I succeeded in encircling her waist.

Upon the fragrant grass, we tumbled, falling in laughter beneath the warm embrace of the afternoon sun. Sofia's gentle hands cradled my cheeks, and in a moment that eclipsed the heartbeat of time itself, her lips met mine. The ticking of the clock seemed to stop, leaving only the echo of a timeless symphony, where hours dissolved into the boundless expanse of the universe. All that remained was my memory, the soft warmth of her touch and the rapture of that blissful kiss, framed against the blue of the summer sky, stretching into eternity.

Chapter 12

It would be difficult for me if I had to recount everything that went on within me during the week following my unfortunate nighttime adventure. It was a strange, feverish period, a kind of chaos in which the most confusing emotions, thoughts, suspicions, hopes, joys, and sufferings whirled in a never-ending storm. I was afraid to look into myself, if indeed a twelve-year-old possesses such self-awareness. I feared to confront any aspect of the emotions I was experiencing. I simply tried to live through each day until the evening. But when night fell, and I prepared for bed, a childish idealism overcame me. I had no desire to understand whether I was loved, and refused to admit to myself the possibility that I might not be.

I distanced myself from my parents, yet I could not disregard Sofia. In her presence, I burned with a curious, all-possessing fever, and there was no use knowing what sort of fever took hold over me, for I never wanted to get well again and refused any help that might alleviate my malady! I allowed my emotions to consume me from the moment I woke up until I closed my eyes at night. I couldn't handle my thoughts, I couldn't push aside the feelings that flooded me like someone drowning in the deepest of oceans, nor could I close my eyes to what I felt might happen in the future. This anguish probably would have continued if a devastating event hadn't put a sudden end to everything and hurled me onto a new path.

On returning home one day to dinner from a rather exciting ride on my pony, I discovered, to my surprise, that I was to dine alone. My father had departed for a visit to the Ambassador's residence, while my mother was feeling unwell and chose not to dine, shutting herself up in her bedroom.

From the troubled look on the footman's face, I foresaw that something unexpected had taken place. Hindered by my insignificant age, I dared not interrogate them. However, I had an ally in the form of the young butler, Pablo, a passionate admirer of poetry and a skilled artist on the guitar. It was from him, I eventually learned, that a dreadful scene had taken place between my father and mother, because in the maids' room every detail was audible, and the maid Clara overheard it all.

The tale went that my mother had received rumours of unseemly passions between Sofia and me, insinuating that Sofia, with unwarranted audacity, had taken undue liberties by charming me and seducing my innocence with her unbecoming and increasingly indecent fervour. Meanwhile, my father calmly defended me, asserting that I'm only a child. Even if I held such feelings for Sofia, it was merely a desire for enjoying a happy summer retreat before resuming my studies.

This arguing went on until my father, in a moment of exasperation, made a harsh remark that reduced my mother to tears. But all efforts on my behalf were in vain, because my mother produced a note of hand, which appeared to have been delivered to her by a *corrieri*. The note talked very vilely, detailing scandalous accusations against the young Contessa and implicating my unwholesome persistence in the matter.

"The whole trouble arose," explained Pablo, "out of an anonymous letter. However, the identity of the writer remains unknown. If not for this person, there would be no reason for this entire affair to come out."

"But what am I to do now?" I struggled to reason, my hands and feet turning cold, and something began to shudder in the very depths of my chest.

Pablo offered a broad smile. "Fear not, your papa still stands by your side. As for the rest, allow the Countess some space. Perhaps this whole affair will blow over in a matter of days, and no one will bother either of you with such trivial insinuations."

After dismissing Pablo, I flung myself onto my bed. I did not sob, I did not indulge the pull of despair. I ignored the bitter question of when and how all this had taken place. I wasn't surprised that I hadn't anticipated it sooner, long before our love became apparent to everyone around us. I didn't even rage against my mother—that, I had learned, was beyond my strength. This sudden revelation had left me utterly crushed. It was all over. All my flowers had been ripped up at once and now lay strewn around me, scattered and trampled underfoot.

Chapter 13

On the following day, my mother declared our imminent return to Rome, and from there back to our home in England. After breakfast, my father went inside her bedroom and remained there alone with her for a long time. No one spoke or said anything to me, but my mother did not weep any more. She calmed down and eventually regained her composure. Later, she even asked for something to eat, though she did not present herself and maintained her steadfast resolve.

I remember wandering aimlessly throughout the day, brooding in my discontent. I refrained from venturing into the garden and did not glance even once at Sofia's window.

Come evening, I bore witness to an astonishing incident. My father, linking arms with Conte Alfieri, escorted him from the hall into the anteroom. In the presence of a lackey, my father addressed him with an icy tone. "Several days ago, Your Radiance was shown the door in a certain residence. I shall not delve into explanations at present, but I must inform you that any return to my house will result in your being expelled through the window. I don't like your handwriting."

The Conte bowed, gritted his teeth, flinched, and vanished from sight.

Preparations began for the long journey back to Richmond, where our residence in England awaited. Perhaps my father himself no longer cared to linger in this place, yet it was apparent that he had successfully persuaded my mother not to make a row with the Morettis. Everything unfolded quietly, tamely, and without haste. My mother, in a gesture of civility, even extended her regards to the old

Contessa, expressing regret that, due to her ailing health, she would be unable to visit before her departure.

I drifted around the villa, lost and desponded like a squirrel without a tree, and desired but one thing—that everything comes to an end as soon as possible. One persistent thought, however, never left my mind—how could she, a young girl and a Contessa no less, commit herself with such resolve to fall in love with someone like me? I, who is not only a mere child, but a girl like herself? She had the prospect of marrying a Conte or a doctor—someone who could rescue her from the encroaching poverty and insignificance. Yet, she discarded it all to indulge my selfish infatuation.

What had she seen in me? How was it that she could caution me about our affection jeopardising her family and ruining her future, yet be fearless of enfolding me in love and selfless devotion?

And then, awareness dawned on me—that's what love is. That's what passion is... That's what devotion is... and I recalled Falcone's words, "*Some people find solace in self-sacrifice.*"

On one occasion, I caught a glimpse of a bright outline in one of the windows of the wing. Could it be Sofia's face, I pondered... and indeed, it was her face. I could not resist. I could not part from her without bidding a final farewell. Seizing a favourable moment, I made my way to her garden.

In the drawing-room, the aged Contessa received me with her accustomed, casual greeting.

"What has stirred your folks so early, my dear child?" she inquired, stuffing snuff up both her nostrils. I scrutinised her, and a weight seemed to lift from my heart. The word *note of hand* that my mother had received held no meaning for her. She appeared oblivious, so it seemed to me then, at least.

Sofia emerged from the adjoining room, wearing a black gown, pale, with tresses out of place, and eyes that betrayed recent tears. Silently, she took me by the hand and led me away to her room.

"I heard your voice," she began, "and came out at once. How could you find it so easy to forsake me, my sweet girl?"

"I have come to bid you farewell, Contessa. Probably forever," I replied, already feeling my throat constricting and my eyes misting. "You may have heard we are departing, going back to our country."

Sofia stared at me intently.

"Yes, I have heard. Thank you for coming, Emmie. I feared I might not see you again. Think kindly of me, my love. I may have tormented you at times, but I am not the sort of person you think I am."

She turned away, leaning against the window frame.

"Truly, I am not that sort of person. I am aware you hold a poor opinion of me."

"No, Sofia..."

"Yes, you... you, my beloved."

"No..." I repeated, pained by her words, and my heart began to sting as of old, surrendering to the pull of the irresistible, inexpressible longing. "Believe me, Sofia, regardless of what you may have done, however you may have tormented me, I shall love and adore you until the end of my life."

She turned suddenly towards me, and extending her arms widely, cupped my cheeks, and kissed me fervently, with lips impatient and burning with tears. God alone knows how I ached for that long, farewell kiss, savouring it with passion and bittersweet yearning in my heart. This kiss, I was aware, would never more be repeated. This is the end, I whispered to myself. Farewell, farewell, my love. I shall never see you again.

She abruptly tore herself away and ran out of the room.

I left also. The feeling I carried within me defies description. I should not wish ever to endure it again, yet I should count myself unfortunate if I had never experienced it.

Epilogue

We left Castel Gandolfo with the morning light. I did not immediately detach myself from the past, nor did I willingly take up my education. Days dragged endlessly, and my heart was all-consumed by what I had lost and the pain I had suffered. How is it possible not to revolt, I thought. How is it possible to endure a blow from anyone whatsoever, simply for being in love?

But evidently it can be done. My wound healed gradually with the passage of time, but the injustice and cruelty born of one's vengeful jealousy forever remained etched in my memory. What could have been if we were allowed a little more time, a little more space to wander about, close to one another? I shall never know, and perhaps there would be nothing to speak of now if grief did not overshadow our happiness.

The months since we returned to England had aged me greatly. My immediate concerns about my education, with all their agitations and prospects for the future, seemed to me like something very petty, childish and wretched in comparison with that singular glimpse, that elusive moment at which I could only vaguely grasp. It captured me like a strange and beautiful, but menacing force that one strives, in vain, to forever hold within one's own heart.

In due course, I resumed my education, and six months later my father died from a stroke, leaving me alone with my mother. She had never spoken to me about the handwritten note since those days, nor did Sofia's name ever cross her lips. We remained distant, and strangers to one another within our home, where only unspoken suspicions lingered in the air long after the quiet claimed the rooms.

To be twelve again; to be cradled in her arms; to be kissed by her lips while lying in the grass on a warm summer day—those were the thoughts that occupied my days forever, since that single summer in Castel Gandolfo.

The days pass quickly now, unnoticed and unaccounted for, and within me, everything wanes away, like wax in the sun, like snow... And perhaps the whole secret of youth lies not in the power to accomplish all, but in the belief that such power exists—in the fact that it scatters to the winds its strength which it does not understand how to employ in any other way. Even sorrow and melancholy seem fitting when we are young, and each of us a spendthrift, sincerely believing we have the right to say, "Oh, what could I not have done if I hadn't wasted my time!"

And as for myself... What were my hopes, what were my expectations, what rich future did I envision, when I barely reacted with a single sigh, with a single trace of mournful emotion, to the spectre of my first forbidden love which had arisen for a brief, exhilarating moment?

And what has become of all for which I hoped? Even now, as the shadows of evening are beginning to descend upon my life, is there anything that remains fresher, more precious than the memory of that morning summer thunder-storm which sped so swiftly past in my twelfth year?

But I end this reverie without just cause. Even in that frivolous, youthful era, I did not remain indifferent to the sorrowful voice which responded within me, nor to the triumphant echoes carried on the breeze from afar.

I clasp the dear letter within my hand and smile. The approaching morning light, streaming through the window, imbues Sofia's tender words with a warm glow. Though distance parts us, her love offers purpose just when it is most needed—a light to guide my path when all other lights seem dimmed.

For whenever Sofia's words find me, it is as if a flower of hope has bloomed.

The End